SOUTH MOON UNDER

By

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Since "South Moon Under" is a novel and not a history—its characters, with one or two minor exceptions, entirely fictitious—the author asks the indulgence of the few Floridians who really know the Big Scrub, for the loose chronologizing of such happenings as the Big Burn, the inception of game and liquor laws, the activities of the Wilson Cypress Company, and so forth

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I

Night entered the clearing from the scrub The low tangled growth of young oak and pine and palmetto fell suddenly black and silent, seeming to move closer in one shadowy spring The man told himself there was nothing to fear Yet as he walked towards his cabin, naked and new on the raw sand, darkness in this place seemed to him unfriendly

He thought, Time I get me a fence raised tomorrow, maybe 'twon t seem so wild, like."

Light still hung raggedly above the hammock west of the cleared acres Here and there a palm shook its head against the faint orange of the sky, or the varnished small leaves of a live oak were for a moment luminous There was an instant when the hammock reared back against the west, when the outline of each tree top was distinct, when the clearing gathered about it the shreds of twilight Then there was no longer scrub or clearing or hammock Blackness obliterated them with a great velvet paw and crouched like a panther on the cabin doorstep

The man tested the security of the split rails that formed a temporary pen about his hogs The grey mule was hobbled and the scrub milch cow tethered The chickens clacked and fluttered in the coop that must hold them until a proper roost was built After the fence was raised, they could all run free He stood by the coop a moment His thoughts stirred uneasily in his mind, milling like the

fowls He could not be sure that he had done well to move his family here, across the river He had not made a good living in the piney woods Only the knowledge of his native Florida wife and of his neighbours, her kin, had kept him to the few crops that would yield on that grey shifting land His family of five was of an age now to help with the crops He had exchanged pine land for scrub, with a precarious fringe of hammock

The Florida scrub was unique The man Lantry recognised its quality as well as its remoteness There was perhaps no similar region anywhere It was a vast dry rectangular plateau, bounded on three sides by two rivers The Ocklawaha, flowing towards the north, bounded it on the west At the north west corner of the rectangle the Ocklawaha turned sharply at right angles and flowed due east, joining, at the north-east corner, the St John's River which formed the eastern demarcation

Within these deep watery lines the scrub stood aloof, uninhabited through its wider reaches The growth repelled all human living The soil was a tawny sand, from whose parched infertility there reared, indifferent to water, so dense a growth of scrub pine—the Southern spruce—that the effect of the massed thin trunks was of a limitless, canopied stockade It seemed impenetrable, for a man high growth of scrub oak, myrtle, sparkleberry and ti ti filled the interstices Wide areas, indeed, admitted of no human passage.

In places the pines grew more openly, the sunlight filtered through and patches of ground showed bald and lichened The scrub was sparingly dotted with small lakes and springs Around these grew a damp loving hammock vegetation Or a random patch of moisture produced, alien in the dryness, a fine stand of slash pine or long leaf yellow These were known as pine islands To any one standing on a rise, they were visible from a great distance

The scrub rolled towards its boundaries like a dark sea It cast itself against the narrow beach of swamp and hammock that fringed the rivers The two types of growth did not mingle, as though an ascetic race withdrew itself from a tropical one and refused to inter-breed The moisture along the rivers gave a footing for the lush growth of cypress in the swamp, of live oak, magnolia, hickory, ash, *bay, sweet gum and holly that made up the adjoining* hammock

The western edge of the scrub plateau was high The Ocklawaha ran forty or fifty feet below, so that its scrub side bank rose from the river swamp in a steep ledge Here Lantry had come, clearing land in the narrow strip of hammock along the top of the ridge The scrub adjoining in front of his cabin had been recently burned over by forest fire The bush was young and low and he could see across it for a mile or two

He had high hopes of the hammock soil He had a deeper hope of what should pass for security, a sense of safety achieved through isolation For ten miles, north or *south, there were no other settlers Behind him the river* ran, deep banked and swift of current Before him lay the scrub Miles on miles of scrub rolled impenetrable between his clearing and the rising sun and moon

He picked up a gourd foaming with the night's milk and moved to the house Light from a fat wood hearth fire flickered through the small paned windows on three sides of the cabin He lifted the wooden shoestring latch of the door The clatter of cooking utensils on the clay hearth, bitten into by the snapping of the fire, was the only sound in the room The woman, the three boys and two girls seemed frozen, waiting for his return, like a vixen and her litter in a den They stirred to life as he closed *the door and handed the gourd to* his daughter Piety

"Ol' cow know she's done been moved," he commented

'Didn t give no more'n the half o' what she belongs to give'

Relaxing, they looked at him where he stood massive across the door The man Lantry was tall and bulky He was red brown, full bearded There was a stiffness about his beard and hair, so that the firelight darting across them gave the effect of sunlight on brown pine needles His eyes were red brown, deep-sunk like pools of cypress water He made on strangers an instant impression of violence, but no one in the country could report him as anything but quiet

The Lantry woman was small and fox faced She sat on her haunches before the fire, her long nose pointed over a black Dutch oven steaming with squirrel stew Her scant streaked hair was twisted in a tight knob at the nape of her neck Now and then she lifted a claw like hand to smooth a wisp back of her ear She turned her head to Lantry over her shoulder

'You jest as good to put your baccy back in your pocket, she said, for supper s that near done hit ll be to spit out and waste '

He continued to pare a shaving from his twist

He said, "A short chaw s twicet as good as a long un '

The boys dragged straight wooden benches and split hickory chairs from against the walls to make seats along a rough deal table The girls laid the table with a red cloth, white English crockery and heavy knives and spoons. They handed plates to their mother, which she filled with the stew, with soft-cooked grits and white flour biscuits The yield of corn had been poor the previous summer across the river and they had long since been out of meal They drank heartily of thick coffee, thrice boiled since morning The sugar, of their own making, was brown and sticky but of good flavour

There was little talk while they ate, but the meal was

shot through with excitement There had been cold lunches eaten at the clearing while they worked on the house, but this was the first family supper cooked on the new hearth This was to be the first night of sleeping in the scrub They were here at last to stay, yet the place seemed more unfamiliar than before The accustomed dishes were strange They had moved in actual distance no more than twenty five miles But they had crossed the river into the scrub The clear dark stream divided one world from another

Mrs Lantry was the first to finish She was insensitive to change, so long as the major matters of food and bed were not interfered with She sat at the end of the table nearest the fireplace, her hands folded in her lap, until the others should be done with their plates The boys had bolted their meal They teetered back in their chairs, seeing who could lean the farthest Young Thaddeus suddenly spilled backwards, and the older two, Zeke and Abner, were on him like terriers The woman had no interest in their tumblings Lantry laughed aloud, wiping the red mouth above his beard with the back of his hand

The girl Piety said, 'Them crazies!'

Her look darted from the wrestling boys to the father; to the mother She was alert to their thoughts

She said to her sister Martha, 'Wouldn t we ketch it, iffen we was to toss and mess that a way!'

The mother said, "'Tain't mannerly, no-ways

"Sho, hit's good for young uns," Lantry said

He rose from the table and moved his chair close to the hearth He stirred the coals, adding a log of live oak, and spat into the fire His wife scraped the plates, opening the door a crack to put out the scraps for the hound whimpering outside. The girls laid away the red cloth and washed the few dishes in a pan on the table

The boys threw themselves on the rough pine floor

before the hearth, watching the flames The girl Piety went to the east window and pressed her forehead against the pane She stood some time, looking out into the blackness of the late winter night

Lantry asked, 'What you studyin', Py tee?"

"Nothin' Lookin' to see is there ary thing to study"

"You look out You might r'aly see you somethin'"

Mrs Lantry said, "She wouldn't keer no ways She's a perfeckly cur'ous young un"

Young Thaddeus spoke eagerly

'Pa, what all you reckon s here in the scrub? Varmints and snakeses and sich?"

The man looked long into the fire before he spoke His red brown beard shone Thoughts beyond the immediate question rippled across the deep pools of his eyes Piety watched him closely, her eyes small and bright. He answered slowly

"I dunno I dunno what-all's here The same as on 'tother side o' the river, is what I been tole B'ar, likely, same as there Cattymounts and lynxes and wild cats Ol' man Wilson, your daddy," he nodded at his wife, "done tole me there was oncet hundreds o' wolves, quare lookin' and pieded"

The boys fidgeted in delight

The woman said with some animation, "I mind me o' him tellin' all that Him and the ol' timers say there were a day when 'twa'n't safe to dress a beef in the woods and tote it home alone"

Abner said belligerently, 'They ain't no wolves now. Leastways they ain't none in the piney woods yonder"

Lantry nodded 'That's it Ol' man Wilson said one day the wolves was here, hundreds The next day they was gone Jest plumb gone No man kin say where they goed They mought o' died o' some sort o' plague Folkses

mought o' got too thick for 'em here in Floridy and they mought o' takened out one night and goed off to Texas"

He stroked his beard

"They's mighty leetle here to harm a man"

There was a defiance in his voice There was something underneath what he said, Piety thought, like a trout thrashing around under what seemed still water

He said, "A panther kin worry a man I wouldn't want no panther trailin' me nor trackin' me But they ain't attackded much more n young uns, when it comes to humans I ain't much afeerd of a b'ar A wild hog's bad, now, and rattlesnakes"

He was talking aloud to himself He rose from his chair and paced up and down the room, his chin sunk in his beard, his hands behind his back His voice was heavy in the room, like thunder

"The worst things I knows of is rattlesnakes and some kinds o' people And a rattlesnake minds his own matters if he ain't bothered A man's got a right to kill ary thing, snake or man, comes messin' up with him"

Piety thought, "He's afeerd o' somethin' Somebody interferin'"

It chilled her, that Lantry was afraid

Mrs Lantry said, 'I'd orter be piecin'. You gals had orter be piecin'." She said after a moment, 'I m too wore out, movin' over and all, for piecin'"

The family was silent Thought of the change was a common holding Lantry and the woman and the boys and girls drew close to one thought It was a smouldering fire among them Now and then a fresh blaze flamed into speech Each one fed a few words to the fire

Zeke said, "I reckon ever'thing's a mite different"

Abner said, "Seems to me they's cat squirrels this side o' the river, 'stead o' fox-squirrels"

'You kin lay to it, they's a reason,' Lantry said "You jest don't know the reason yit"

Mrs Lantry said, 'You-all kin set up if you're a mind to I m fixin' to git into the bed I be wore out"

She let down her streaked thin hair and braided it over her sharp shoulders Her nose was peaked between the braids

Abner said in a low voice, 'Ma looks somethin' like a varmint with her hair that a way

Zeke and Thaddeus guffawed The woman gathered a swift vixenish energy to slap the boy across the face

You be mannerly, you!'

Lantry frowned

You boys turn your backs now while the girls gits undressed

Piety and Martha took off their garments as far as cotton undershifts, slipped on muslin gowns with long sleeves and high necks, plaited their soft young hair like their mother's Mrs Lantry undressed

'Ary one want to wash their feet?"

The day s work had been cleanly Feet were not soiled Mrs. Lantry padded about on bare soles with a hand basin of warm water from the black iron kettle on the hearth Each took a turn at washing face and hands with the coarse washrag Lantry and the boys undressed as far as their undersuits, stretched their toes, cramped from heavy home made cowhide boots, before the fire Lantry and his wife went into the adjoining room and between quilts into a large pine bed The girls followed into the same room, taking a smaller bed at the other end The boys were left, three to the one bed, in the main room of the cabin They called luxuriously to their sisters, thrashing their cold feet under the covers

'Py tee! Marthy! We got the farr! You all never figgered on the farr!'

Mrs Lantry called wearily, 'You boys shut your mouths now The girls is warm as you"

The fire crackled The light played jerkily over the high new rafters The Lantrys were warm under thick hand pieced quilts Mrs Lantry snored thinly, like a cat There was no other sound but the sputtering fat wood

In the night Lantry awakened with a start The chickens were cackling in alarm The hound, huddled under the doorstep, was rumbling The man threw on his jacket, examined his 11 gauge muzzle loader and went out of the cabin into the yard The hound crouched close at his heels The chickens quieted as he came to the coop The night was chill and black He could see nothing He walked around the house, wishing that he had brought a fat wood splinter torch The hound reared against him, lick ing his hand Whatever the intruder, it was of little con sequence He felt his way to the front stoop A small figure in a long white gown stood there

'That you, Py tee? He knew in the night that it was she 'The night airs ll do for you, child"

'I wanted to see what all were stirrin' out here"

She walked down from the stoop, her bare feet white against the sand She stood by him, close under his shoulder, her arms crossed over her thin breast, shivering. They listened together

'You wa'n't afeerd to foller me, Py tee?'

'I wa'n't no-ways afeerd"

As they stood, the blackness dissolved The sky was a mass of stars, close and bright The starlight spread towards the earth, so that as they watched, the chicken coop was visible The thick line of hammock behind the clearing moved in sight Stars clustered about the chimney-top like silver bees in swarm

The girl said, 'The longer you studies, the more you kin see in the dark, like"

He turned her ahead of him into the house

"'Twa'n't nothin' out here but a varmint A 'possum or sich arter the chicks They needs a roost"

The man looked at the straight figure, diminutive in the long gown

He said softly, "Leetle ol' scrawny cur'ous young un"

Over his shoulder, closing the door, the cabin stood in the clearing like a house on an island He thought that he heard the river running below the ledge The river was a wall for his back In front of the clearing the scrub rolled in, lapping at the edges of the bare sand like a vast sea

II

An hour before sunrise the girl Piety was awakened by the throaty cries of hoot-owls The great night birds had seldom sounded in the piney woods The bare pines were not to their liking They preyed on small creatures that fed in the richness of marsh and hammock Their cry was stirring, like a thick sob It rose in a rhythmic crescendo of four major notes, subsiding in agony in a minor key

It had a pattern and a tune It was, strangely, a dance step A bass fiddle was playing a schottusche Piety had seen a man and woman from Virginia dance the schottische Slowly, one two-three four And then a quick running step [illegible]

d[illegible]

embers to life under fresh fat wood splinters The boys breathed heavily in their bed The coffee pot was empty of liquid and she added new coffee and water from the kettle to the stale grounds In the bedroom behind her she could hear her mother creaking from the bed Lantry's deep voice sounded in a question

The girl hurried from the cabin Voices would soon populate the rooms The sun would fill the earth with the sounds of birds and creatures Men would come shortly after sunrise to help Lantry raise his fences Women would bring food and gossip, children would run across the clearing There was a need for hurry For a few moments she could listen to the hoot-owls, v brant in the grey daylight

As the slow light felt its way towards the house, she saw the scrub recede, as though darkness were going out like a tide. It was the hammock that was black now. The scrub unrolled towards the east in mist-filled valleys. The thin young pines and palmettos were no taller than she. She could look far across them to the horizon, pink and purple like the petunias they had brought with them to plant. She was startled—where she looked, the scrub was moving. The motion was almost imperceptible, yet the pines before her had changed their position. Against the east appeared a set of antlers; another. The smooth unhorned heads of does lifted in the mist. Piety ran across the clearing into the house. She cried out to the Lantrys.

"I seed deer! A hull mess o' deer! 'Most as many as cattle!"

They stared at her, absorbed with the day's beginning. Abner guffawed.

"A body'd figger you r'aly seed somethin'," he said. "Deer's plentiful."

Lantry stretched his long legs, lacing his boots by the morning fire

"Hit's one thing to know," he said, "and 'tother thing to see. You kin know deer's plentiful all your life time, but it ain't like seein' 'em clustered-like, the way Py-tee jest done."

She looked at him with bright eyes, breathing quickly. She had heavy lids, like a turtle's. They moved up and down over the direct hazel-coloured eyes. Her hair was hazel-brown. It still hung in the night's plaitings. Slowly, looking into the fire, she unbraided it. Mrs. Lantry was frying hot cakes on a long oval griddle propped on bricks over the flames. The smell of lard and batter and coffee was sweet in the room. Piety forgot the deer.

The fire on the hearth was golden in the sunlight that came in through the front windows. The room was quick

with the vibrancy of change. The night's sleep had made the place familiar The Lantrys had slept in their own beds in this house and it became overnight their home The woman and her children accepted the cabin, as squirrels accept a nest in new feeding grounds Only Lantry paced up and down the room before he went about his chores, his chin sunk in his beard

The boys fed the chickens in their coop, the mule and cow at their stakes The feed was a coarse corn fodder The animals were fed from troughs hand hewn from cypress Lantry milked the cow He leaned his face against her warm flank, his long fingers rippling over the teats She was a heifer with her first calf and skittish He spoke to her now and then, his voice deep in his beard

Piety and Martha tidied the cabin, hanging garments on nails behind the doors They swept the floors with a new broom sage sweep The old palmetto broom had been left behind, for it was unlucky to move it Mrs Lantry busied herself with the day's dinner She had protested the day of the fence raising as coming too soon after the move She had had no time to bake and stew Lantry was anxious to fence, and sent the word up and down the river, ignoring her

He said, 'Folkses ll carry rations"

'I don t want to be scarce with the table,' she said

The Wilsons, Mrs. Lantry's kin, appeared at the river end of the clearing before Piety had the stoop swept They had come by rowboat across the river The hammock immediately behind the house had been cleared as far as the top of the steep river bank The Wilsons heads bobbed abruptly over the edge of the clearing, as though they had been in hiding all night behind the ledge They walked splay footed, bent a little forward, pushing against the shifting soil The women carried baskets among them They were dressed in neat cotton prints with large hats of

woven palmetto strands The men wore their ordinary boots and breeches or blue denim trousers

They hailed Lantry with reserve The tall massive man who had walked with great strides into their section some twenty years before and had married their kinswoman was still unknown to them They did not have with him the ease of intercourse they had among themselves The women went into the house Piety lingered at her sweeping on the stoop The men in the yard called, 'Howdy, Miss Py tee," and she answered, 'Howdy"

Old man Wilson said, watching Lantry at a pile of cypress slats ready for the fencing, 'I favors a split rail fence myself Good heart pine"

Lantry said, pointing, 'I got split rails laid out yonder. I aim to fence the yard with slats and split rail the rest I like a yard fenced in so's a stranger cain t jest step over"

Wilson nodded 'That s a good idee A man kin step over a split rail fence"

They handled the wood, discussing grain and quality The men meandered about the clearing, making free com ment The scrub was unknown to many of them who had seldom crossed the river They remarked the sharpness of the line where hammock ended and scrub began Spudd Wilson hunted here

He said, "Hit's the river Hammock follers the water Here's the river and the swamp and the bank Hit's plentiful wet The hammock follers the wet First foot you gits away from the river damp, and into the white sand and the sand soaks, nothin' won't make exscusin' pal meeters and that sorry pine"

Jack Wilson said, spitting, "And rattlesnakes"

They guffawed, their mouths wide

'I mean!"

Old man Wilson said, "I don't like the scrub This hammock piece here is fine ground, and game plentiful.

But I wouldn't keer to live with the scrub shuttin' me in this-a way" He added profoundly, "But it's ever' man to his taste. I got nothin' to say"

The sun was an hour high before other families reached the clearing from Big Saw Grass, Tobacco Patch Landing, Turner Farm, Mill Creek and Moss Bluff They came largely by river The Lantry landing at the foot of the bluff was boggy and the visitors arrived with wet and mucky shoes The women and girls sat down in the yard and took off their shoes and stockings with relief They were accustomed to going with bare feet about their own homes It was good to stretch their broad strong toes in the clean sand Piety placed their shoes in a row They walked with curiosity through the cabin Many expressed disappointment that Mrs Lantry had nothing new in the way of chairs or tables, that the windows were bare of curtains and that there was no kitchen She was not offended

"'Tain't nothin' special," she agreed, 'but we kin make out 'til the crops gits a goin'"

Piety led them outside to the western wall The two windows here had no panes, but were fitted with wooden shutters that could be swung to at night

She told them, 'Pa promises faithful when the spring crops is made, him and the boys ll put a blow way here and another bedroom to the side and a kitchen yonder'

They approved the prospect

'Hain t nothin' like a kivered blow way for comfort."

'Yes," Ella Martin complained, 'but the men folks keeps 'em so littered with their contraptions, their ol trapses and sich, they ain't no room hardly to set and shell peas"

'Well, when the guns and the trapses gits too thick, I pitches 'em off the place ' Annie Wilson said

'Yes, and Annie wouldn t be past pitchin' off the men theirselves"

They laughed together in a soft cackling The woman Annie Wilson laughed with them with a rich sound She was heavily built, deep-voiced and deep-breasted Her hair grew thick and low, the shining black of gallberries There was a dark down on her upper lip and on her large arms She took everything comfortably, as it came Piety darted her quick look from Annie to the others She thought that it was easy to distinguish the women who did field work from those who did not The women who helped their men to plough, to hoe, to cultivate, to harvest, were stripped gaunt and lean, stringy as an overworked horse Only the women of more casual natures, like Annie Wilson, or of better circumstances, like the Fikes and Jacklin women, grew stout in middle age

At eight o clock late-comers came in wagons from Ft. McCoy, Orange Springs and Eureka They had crossed the river by ferry at the Springs and by bridge at Eureka They plodded up the sandy road that bordered the river between scrub and hammock They found the fence raising in full swing The men joined the others already at work Twenty five or thirty men and boys swarmed about the split rails, the gates, the stakes and the posts that were to put the mark of civilisation on the clearing

They worked leisurely, stopping short, dropping their hands to boast of strength and speed, to tell a derisive anecdote of one of them Yet while they were in movement they worked deftly When Mrs Lantry was occupied, Piety slipped away to watch the men The fencing of fields was of greater interest than house matters The slat fence about the yard went slowest A group of six, familiar with such a style of fencing, toiled most of the day at the smaller area Post holes were dug, posts driven deep, slats nailed between with square nails and at last, breast high to Lantry, a flat top was nailed on for finish These men worked quietly The job was exacting

Most of the men worked at the split rail fences around the cleared fields The type of fence was familiar to the youngest boy and it went up rapidly Lantry and his sons, labouring all of their spare time for two years, had wrestled twenty acres of ground clear of the jungle hammock Now in a little while, between sun and sun, a hand ful of men was shutting it in

They tussled with the grey, seasoned wood, but there was an abandon in the familiar motions They sweat and jostled and jested and threw a fence carelessly about what had been so recently a virgin wood The fence went in a zig zag pattern The eye of old man Wilson overseeing, was true Where men piled the rail-ends at the corners, interlacing them like the fingers of two hands, there became evident an undeviating straightness

Some of the women left the house and came to the fields to watch Piety trailed them Annie Wilson climbed ponderously into a wagon to look down the fence line which wavered insolently, like a drunken man, along the pushed back edge of hammock The men dropped the rails to watch her, large and rich and black headed She put her hands on her broad hips

How we comin, Annie?" they bellowed

She bellowed back at them

A heap neater'n I figgered you d git it!'

They roared with laughter

'Looks jest like feather stitchin'," she called, "dogged if it don t"

Mo Jacklin yelled, You come take a hand, Annie, see kin you feather stitch with split pine!"

She eased her heavy body over the wagon wheels and rested a hand on Piety's shoulder as she jumped She ran to the men on small agile feet Her teeth were white in her dark face Beads of sweat were like crystals across her forehead and her downy upper lip She lifted an armful

of rails and hurled them at the men They warded them off or dodged them or caught them from her in the air

"I'll feather," she panted, "and you all kin sutch!"

Spudd Wilson protested, doubling up with laughter, "Iffen you'd please to feather with somethin' light, Ma'am——"

Old man Fikes, her uncle, broke a switch from a myrtle bush

He said, "Annie, it's been thirty yare since I whopped you when you was a young un, and you 'bout four time the size you was then But dogged if I ain't man enough to do hit agin You git back to the women folks and leave the men raise their fences"

She left them, turning a broad amiable back Mo Jacklin called after her

"When we're ready to stake and rider, come on back, Annie, and set on top o' the stakes and they'll be no need o' drivin' 'em"

She joined the women, puffing and chuckling Most of them were pale and quiet Her robustness was a rank growth, like a huge ragweed flowering in a worn-out field The thin women dropped their eyes

Ella Martin said querulously, "Iffen you worked hard as I do, Annie Wilson, you'd have no strength left for sich foolishness"

Annie linked her arm in Piety's and they walked together to the yard Piety saw her mother's face sharpen The long nose seemed to grow more pointed Mrs. Lantry reproached her cousin

"I'll say to your face, Annie, what I'll say behind your back 'Tain't mannerly no-ways to go scaperin' acrost to the men folks that a way"

The big woman laughed

"I always gives them fellers as good as they sends," she said "They perfeckly enjoys it," she added complacently.

The women called in some of the younger boys to help lay plank tables on the south side of the house Romping children and sprawling babies were pushed aside to make room Mrs Lantry brought out a long white tablecloth The others protested its use

'No use lettin' them dirty men smutty it"

Gratified, she sent Piety to return it to her trunk in the bedroom The guests had brought more food than twice their number could eat Each woman flushed with satisfaction over her splint hickory basket as the others insisted she had brought too much Mrs Lantry was providing pork backbone and rice for the crowd The last of the winter's butchering had been done before leaving the west side of the river Sausage casings had been stuffed and given a first smoking Hams and shoulders and side meat had been put down in barrels of salt brine The fresh backbones were simmering in the black iron wash pot, the smell sweet and heavy on the thin March air As the sun rose high, rice was added Piety was told to stir the pot

Annie Wilson said, 'Leave Marthy do it Then mought be she'd git Syl Jacklin to he'p"

Mrs Lantry said, I dont aim to encourage Marthy courtin'. She ain't but sixteen'

Annie said easily, 'I'd buried me a man time I were seventeen Sho, Py tee here ain't too young—what you, honey, fifteen? Leastwise, to make a beginnin' Twelve ain't too young jest to let the boys come a settin' around A gal young un o' twelve's mighty near growed"

"Well, mought be, but Marthy's my big he'p in the house Py tee's a purely willin' worker, but she's the biggest crazy for field work Always a follerin' her daddy to the field, totin' a hoe since she were so-big"

Ella Martin said, "Lantry's lucky Them boys is big enough to take out for theirselves 'Twon't be too long 'til

they're done gone Iffen Py-tee's a good hand in the field, I say, Lantry's lucky"

The women warmed up to their talk as the day warmed They buzzed and clacked as they spread out the food, tasting one another's samples Dinner was not at noon, because the men found that by working steadily they could raise the fences without dividing the day in two

"Le's be done when we be done," old man Wilson suggested 'I aim to eat hearty when I sets down to eat, and they ain't a mite o' pleasure in eatin' good and then carryin' your pore full belly to the field agin"

Young boys carried river water to the workers The new-split rails were spotted with the sweat of men Hands were blistered and splintered The lean tanned faces were grimy from a constant wiping away of moisture There was no more jesting The work went doggedly The rails swung into place at the end of long arms, precisely, rapidly There was no pause except to drink from hollow gourds or to bite off a fresh mouthful of tobacco

The women nursed their babies, the breasts hot and pendulous The babies slept Children whimpered and were quieted with sips of water and squares of cake, yellow with eggs and strong with meat-drippings At half past three the men plodded in from the north-east corner The clearing was girdled with good fence The mark of order was on the Lantry lands The men washed their hands and faces, rubbing their hair with damp towels They went to the plank tables and seated themselves Lantry towered over them The sun glinted in his eyes and beard He cleared his throat

'Men," he said, 'I cain't eat a bite without I say I'm powerful proud to have me a noble fence like this un I'm much obliged to you all, I'm shore" He hesitated "Ary time I kin do the same for ary man he'ped me, I'll be proud to have him call on me."

The words were a fixed form Piety saw that they tortured him His teeth were tight together the muscles in his neck constricted All he asked was that these men go away now and leave him alone Old man Wilson helping himself to a fried squirrel head before he sat down, answered for the others

That s jest all right son Lantry Proud to hep and you ll be called on never fear

The women served the food hurrying around the tables with hunched shoulders bending a little forward from years of walking in the sand They had put on their shoes again for the occasion There was a hesitancy in beginning although several had filled their mouths

Mrs Lantry said uncomfortably Reckon somebody had orter give thanks——

I ll ask the blessin Mo Jacklin proffered gravely

He rolled his eyes and nudged Spudd Wilson He bowed his head

Good God with a bounty
Look down on Marion County
For the soil is so pore and so awful rooty too
I don t know what to God the pore folks gonna do

There was a silence a lifting of heads Spudd Wilson covered his mouth to stifle a gulp of mirth Young Johnny Martin giggled and poked Piety standing behind him with a plate of biscuits Annie Wilson s broad shoulders shook Most of the women were vaguely horrified looking at one another They sat down with the men

That s a powerful quare soundin blessin Ella Martin complained Don t know as it s safe to eat under the sign o sich foolishness

The men came stoutly to Mo s defense shovelling in fried chicken pork backbone and rice, sausage beans, grits corn pone and biscuit

"Ary thanks for rations is good thanks," said old Fikes "I figger the Lord know when a man's thankful, and He ain't a goin' to snatch the victuals outen his gullet jest account o' he don't mention 'em ser'ous"

"I mean! When a feller ain't proud to set down to table, and plenty on it, time to git worried over what all God's fixin' to do to him"

"Pass me the rabbit stew," Annie Wilson said She helped herself generously "I'm a slave to rabbit"

The women, for all their leanness, ate as much as the men Talk increased as the eating grew slow They were laboring at the food The men picked and chose among the desserts; pound cake, lard cake, sweet potato pone, pies of canned blueberries and peaches, wild orange preserves, guava paste and cassava pudding

'Must be I got a bait," Mo Jacklin said, "I be gittin' kind o' pertickler"

The men drifted away from the tables The women scraped plates indolently Groups of men squatted on their haunches on the shady side of the stoop, others sat on the edge with legs suspended, chatting idly Clusters of boys threw knives at the young live-oak at the north-west corner of the house The well aimed blades quivered in the wood

Ella Martin called, "You boys'll kill that tree"

Piety said quickly, "They ain't barkin' it none."

The crowd was replete Here and there a man lay back on the sand, his hat over his eyes, and dozed The smaller children slept inside the house, curled like kittens on the beds and on quilts on the floor Their dirty bare feet twitched Now and then a woman came in quietly to look at them In the late afternoon a southerly breeze brought a sound from the road Piety heard it first and pulled at her father's sleeve Lantry lifted his hand.

"Be still!" he said

Spudd Wilson winked

'I figgered them fellers'd be moseyin' along 'bout now"

'Who is it?" Ella Martin asked. "Sounds like a *wagon*"

Spudd said, "Willy Saunders and Buck Hinson and them"

The crowd stirred The men sat upright The women fluttered like disturbed hens Mrs Lantry spoke indig nantly

"Them Moss Bluff rowdies!"

"Easy, daughter! Old man Wilson lifted his eyebrows at her 'They likely bein' sociable They got the same right as ary man to be friendly"

Lantry listened closely, his eyes fixed on the blue haze across the river, as though the approaching sound might be of men from distant hills The creaking of wheels came closer As the wagon emerged from the forest growth, the men riding on high seats waved wide black felt hats and called lustily

'Hi yuh! How's the work a-comin'?"

Lantry walked to the new gate to meet them The others straggled after him He hailed the wagon

"Git down, men, and come in"

The newcomers were four Saunders, Hinson and two strangers They were markedly of a different breed from the men who watched them jump down from their seats They were more heavily built and swarthier, as though a thicker blood ran through them Not all the men knew them Spudd Wilson greeted them in the casual tone of intimacy

"You all's right peert gittin' to a fence raisin' Fence is done raised"

'That's good news, boys' Saunders cocked his head at

his companions "We studied on the correck time to go to a fence raisin', and we figgered 'twere when the work was done done"

He slapped his leg and roared with laughter The rest grinned, spitting Hinson reached in the wagon and lifted out two brown crockery demi johns with corn-cobs for stoppers

'We didn't want you should think hard of us, Mr Lantry, and we carried somethin' we figgered 'd make us a sight more welcome than the work"

Lantry said nothing Old man Wilson looked at him and moved forward

"Men, you're mighty welcome jest so, we had he'p and a plenty, and we're proud to see you But now see here, iffen ever' man figgered that-a way and carried what I reckon you all carried, and come late with it, what I say is—where all'd be the fence raisin'?"

Hinson uncorked a jug

"There shore wouldn't be none," he said, 'but there'd be a mighty merry time"

The crowd laughed and edged in towards the jug Each man drank from the narrow mouth Lantry hesitated a moment, then tipped the jug far back and swallowed deeply He wiped the drops from his mouth

"That's fine, sir That's prime corn liquor." He opened and closed his mouth, judging the after taste "Sprouted corn or meal?"

"'Pears to me the feller made it, mentioned meal," Hinson said demurely

The whiskey was of his own distilling, as all knew They snickered in appreciation

"Come to the house, men, and set down to the table"

Lantry waved them through the gate

"We had dinner, but we kin drink and set," they told him.

They moved to the house with the demi johns Spudd Wilson introduced the Moss Bluff men to the women, gathered together

'Ladies, these here is Mr Saunders and Mr Hinson and their friends'

'How do"

Here and there a woman greeted them, lowering her eyes Piety was afraid food would not be offered them

Mrs Lantry said stiffly, "Won't you set down and eat cold rations?'

They refused food, but invited the women to drink They declined for the most Those who accepted said, 'A mighty leetle Seems like hit goes to my head' Piety noticed that the older women drank with greater gusto Grandma Jacklin said, 'Yes, I ll have a good big swaller I were raised on it, and when hit's good, hit he'ps my stummick" Annie Wilson, too, drank with pleasure.

Mrs Lantry said, 'I got good scuppernong wine I made last summer, iffen you ladies prefers it Go fetch it, Py tee."

The lassitude of the men vanished The liquor, sweet and raw, burned their throats It struck through them, hotter than the noon-day sun, drawing the sweat from them They complained of the quality of the last whiskey sold by the Eureka storekeeper It had no strength, no virtue The price was high Fifty cents a quart was unreasonable It paid a man to make his own

Old man Wilson said, 'I always figger to git me a barrel made from cane-skimmin s in the fall"

The sun dropped below the hammock Twilight came unnoticed Suddenly they were aware of the darkness. Willy Saunders shouted for lights Piety and Martha brought torches of fat wood splinters They held them while Lantry and the boys did the belated chores The Moss Bluff crowd was out-drinking the others two to

The women made ineffectual sorties at their men, hinting of home The men ignored them

"We ain't a goin' home 'til we've done danced with all you ladies," Buck Hinson called

"That's right! Make us a leetle music for a breakdown!"

Three of the men brought their instruments from the house Old man Wilson, as crack fiddler, struck up a tune, "Sugar in the Gourd" One of the Moss Bluff strangers, a little tipsy, picked the strings of a banjo, and Mo Jacklin played the harmonica They played lustily, somewhat out of tune The music jangled and the men clapped their hands The women could not resist patting their feet

Annie Wilson said, "A feller can't dance to 'Sugar in the Gourd is purely ailin' "

Suddenly Lantry leaped into the light of the torches.

'Take your partners!'

He whooped and cried out a verse of the song

> *"Sugar in the gourd*
> *Goed on the ground—*
> *Way to git it out*
> *Is to roll the gourd around"*

He was calling the set No one knew that he was familiar with the figures of the dance They looked at one another Piety edged in close to watch him She followed the big figure with shining eyes Some of the women murmured a protest at dancing with the Moss Bluff men Annie Wilson was kicking off her shoes. Tittering, others of the women removed theirs. They came slowly to the light and men seized them Lantry snapped Annie Wilson towards him as easily, Piety thought, as though the woman were a sapling There were shouts of laughter when Buck Hinson, instead of gathering in one of the pretty girls, swooped on Grandma Jacklin and swung her into the circle forming for the square-dance.

"O'der they be, the more they knows!"

The old woman showed the hit-or miss pattern of her teeth and cackled shrilly She followed until she was out of breath

"I got to quit," she gasped "Listen to me hasslin'"

Then Hinson swung out a girl Annie Wilson and Lantry were dancing furiously He called the figures with a roar

'Take two back!
Promenade all!
Hold that calico
From the wall!'

The pair scuffled hugely in the sand, the woman's bare feet kicking up a spray behind her The bearded man and the big woman cast vast shadows that followed them grotesquely in the smoky light Both were sweating When the set was ended, Annie dropped near by on the sand and fanned her hot face. Piety slipped to her side and sat close against her A warm sweet steam came to her from the woman's flesh She saw a streak of grime across Annie's wrist where Lantry had pulled her towards him.

Lantry called to his wife to dance the next set with him She refused curtly He blew through his beard and drank again from the demi john

Piety heard one man say, "Never did see Lantry that sociable," and another, "No, nor I never seed that much corn liquor into him, to make him sociable" She was pleased that her father danced and sang Old man Wilson began to fiddle again Lantry stood in front of Annie Wilson and Piety He hesitated Then he held out his hand to the girl

'Time your daddy was learnin' you somethin' besides ploughin', honey," he said

She followed him, dizzy with pleasure in the ' ''

his hot hand on her arm When he called the set, swinging her gallantly, he howled the name of a figure that was strange to the dancers They continued to shuffle their feet in time to the music, but did not advance, watching him with puzzled faces He danced the figure and some of the quicker men followed his steps Others dropped out of the set He fell back on familiar figures They sashayed, swung their partners

"Swing or cheat!'

The set was ended Lantry indicated that he was done for the evening The tune makers put up their instruments. The demi john passed around There was excited talk of the new figure Groups knotted here and there outside the light, talking of Lantry The Moss Bluff men nodded to one another

'That feller's from a good ways off," they said wisely

'Lantry,' Willy Saunders said moving close to him, "where did you l arn that figger?'

Lantry did not look at him

'I dis remember I reckon some knows it and some don t"

'Don t nobody know hit in these parts Where all you come from, man?

Saunders asked the question in apparent innocence

The man Lantry seemed to expand The deep chest swelled, like a bull breathing before a charge The vast shoulders lifted higher, the great arms lifting with them The red brown eyes smouldered like coals about to blaze Above his beard clenched teeth bared white for an instant Instinctively the crowd shrank away Piety blinked at him in a sudden panic. She had never seen him so Saunders faced him, swaying a little

'Mought be you ain't a-sayin', Mr Lantry"

There were murmurs It seemed to those who knew Lantry that they had waited twenty years for this moment.

Lantry would bring down his fist like an axe head Willy Saunders would go down like a rotten fence post Through his tipsiness the Moss Bluff man felt their fear He rubbed his eyes and his mouth with the back of his hand Lantry was staring beyond him The big man's pent breath burst out in a sigh He dropped his arms The deep voice rumbled.

'Where I come from, Willy, men ain't impudent nor nosey They minds their business and leaves the other man mind his"

He turned his back Saunders laughed nervously Hinson spoke sullenly

'*Le's go*"

The Moss Bluff men took their jugs and wavered to their wagon They rattled off without leave-taking Mrs Lantry's friends spoke indignantly after their going

"*Them fightin' jessies come jest to stir up a ruckus* Lantry had orter crawled his frame"

Old man Wilson said, 'No, they come sociable. Leave 'em go that a way"

The women gathered up the sleeping children They had divided the food by daylight, each one filling her basket with scraps of another's cooking A plentiful supply was left for Mrs Lantry They said to her, "Hit's hard to cook, and you no more than moved" They were tired and sleepy The men were half-blind with drowsiness They moved silently to their wagons at the gate, through the clearing, the hammock, down the bluff to the river landing, into their rowboats They closed Lantry's new gates after them He had fenced his land in One or two among them understood as well that he had fenced them out

Lantry watched them disappear into the darkness Their voices died away Far down on the river there was the click of an oar lock. The man threw back his head

"Well, you had a plenty this evenin'," Mrs Lantry complained

"Git into the house, woman!"

The woman and her children were as alien to him as the rest He herded them away Piety did not move She watched him, her hand half over her mouth He could never be strange to her, nor far away

She said, "Cain't I he'p free the creeters?"

He stared at her He moved to her, laying his arm across her thin shoulders

He said gently, "Yes, Py tee, we'll turn 'em loose tonight"

They went together to the animals The chickens were asleep in their coop They did not disturb them They untethered the mule and cow and removed the rails from around the hogs The creatures snorted but did not stir. The mule understood that he was free and galloped across the clearing The hogs grunted and shifted Lantry tried the slats here and there

A feeling of elation swept him He panted, like a man who has run a long way in the sun and has now flung himself down in the shade to rest He looked over the fence into the scrub, invisible with night. There was no sound but the stir of the pines He spoke in the blackness to his daughter

"I think we'll git along all right and make a livin'." He hesitated "Honey, I got a idee this place be safe."

III

Five years of planting had levelled the soil of the clearing Sugar-cane and corn had flattened the fields Sweet potatoes had been hilled and the hills knocked down again for the digging Planting, growth and harvest, planting, growth and harvest, they had smoothed the sandy loam to a counterpane flung down between scrub and hammock

Lantry was late with his corn It was April The whip-poor wills had been calling for a month The cane was well advanced, but he was only now planting his field corn Crows made question and answer in the neighbour ing hammock, waiting for the seed to fall The birds inter rogated raucously the man and mule moving steadily, sideways to the high sun The corn dropped like gold nuggets from the one horse planter The crows would drift down like shining leaves of burned paper and would dig it up again

Hearing them, the man felt an instant of despair If there were not crows to fight there was drought, if not drought, insects, incessant rain or mildew Yet he had prospered in his five years in the scrub The fringe of hammock soil had produced with a lushness startling to his experience Corn had grown higher than his head, so that he had moved through it like a bearded prophet. He raised a small patch of tobacco for his own use It had a fine flavour Yams had grown bigger than Piety s thigh His money crop, the cane, had made sugar and syrup of choice quality But he had had three sons at home to fight with him Now they were leaving him.

Abner, the alien among them, had married a cousin and moved back across the river to the piney woods Zeke was homesteading half a mile to the north, duplicating his father s clearing He had married and built a one room cabin soon after New Year s Thaddeus was courting He had promised not to leave until the spring crops were well along, but he worked half heartedly Martha was of little use at field work His wife he discounted She helped to plant and hoe and dig potatoes, but her querulousness was a constant offense He preferred to leave her in the house and yard, complaining over her pots and pans, throwing water at the chickens in a sudden pet After this spring, only Piety would be left to him

The girl was turning beds for sweet potatoes in the north clearing She drove a pony like white horse and small plow The plow handles pulled at her armpits, so that her shoulders jerked at every roughness and her bare feet flew up behind her She held the plow steadily and the lines of her beds were true Lantry watched the small figure on the other side of the clearing as he turned his corner As he looked, the plow point caught a root and bucked The girl plunged forward in a somersault The man dropped his lines to run to her, but in a moment she was on her feet He could see her brush the dirt from her face with her arm and take up the plow lines again

He thought, "She don t weigh enough to hold herself down "

He heard the girl's high shrill voice call to her horse She spoke seldom, and the small thin tones invariably stirred him Hearing her, he felt for a moment that he was not alone in this place He clicked to his mule He finished his planting before Piety was done There were two hours of daylight left and the April sun was warm He fed and watered his mule at the shed west of the house,

then turned the animal to graze in the fenced pasture. He went to the girl

"Leave me finish here, Py-tee," he called to her "The way the plow done wasted you, cain't be you got too much breath left"

"Hit didn't harm me none," she laughed, shaking her small head at him "Whoa!" She lay back on her plow-lines to stop the horse 'I ain't no-ways tired."

"That's what you say, honey Then time you gits to the house, you're a settin' to the table nigh asleep and a-drappin' into the bed like a sack o' meal"

"Well, I wants to finish These is my pertaters!" She defied him, laughing

"Look at you," he derided her "A gal no bigger'n a hammock wren, standin' there a-claimin' a hull pertater field. Dogged if you ain't gittin' impudent as a cricket."

He squatted on his haunches and stuck a straw of broom sage in his mouth

"Go ahead, finish your hills. I'll wait on you and quarrel with you if you don't do it good."

The straight thin back marched away from him, the soles of the dirty bare feet turned back at him He chuckled to himself, his eyes glowing, watching her pride in the evenness of her furrows The broom sage dangled against his beard As she swung back at the far end and moved towards him for the turning of the last bed, he could see that her deep-lidded eyes were fixed far over his head She had picked out a distant tree to run by It made him lonely

They walked side by side to the shed to put up the plough and care for the horse The cow had come to the gate to be milked. Piety let her in and brought the gourd while Lantry fed her The girl rubbed the hard head of the animal as the man milked The sweet scent of the

smooth haired hide, the perfumed breath, mingled with the crunched corn and the sweaty acridity of the human bodies In the cabin Mrs Lantry lifted her voice above the kitchen clatter Martha answered, her voice dull through the pine wall

The milking was done Piety took the gourd of milk in her two hands They walked slowly to the house The breezeway and kitchen had been added at the rear At the steps of the breezeway Lantry said, "Hold steady now" He picked up the girl by the waist and lifted her high, the brimming gourd level in her cupped hands. Her bare toes reached for the floor as he set her down

"That's the way not to waste no milk comin' up the steps"

They laughed at each other Mrs Lantry grumbled at them

Martha said, 'Ma 'pears to me like you'd be used to them cuttin' the fool"

Lantry said, "Yes, Marthy, but she's used to quarrelin', too"

Mrs Lantry said, 'Py tee, you he'p now"

There was no reality except the work of the house The woman knew the field work was hard Yet when the girl came into the house, she made an aggrieved claim on her.

Martha said in a low voice, "Supper s about done, Py tee You go set down I'll finish '

The older girl was almost a woman, phlegmatic and maternal She had Lantry's red coloring faded to sandiness Her plain, solid face was spotted with yellow freckles The younger girl sat on the top step of the breezeway, leaning her head wearily against the wall until supper was called After supper Martha made her a sign that she would take care of the dishes Piety washed her hands and face, her grimy feet and legs, and slipped into the dusky bedroom Twilight filled the room with a

shadowy coolness She got into her nightgown and stretched her legs against the one rough clean sheet She drew a quilt over her and lay drowsily while the twilight deepened into dark and bull-bats darted past the window.

Before the girl dropped to sleep she heard voices on the breezeway Zeke and his wife had walked the half mile from their clearing to pass an hour before bedtime Zeke was lonely after the bustle of a family He came a little wistfully to offer the details of his homesteading for discussion He was a tip nosed, ash headed little fellow like a faded chipmunk He had bright small eyes of robin's egg blue Piety pictured his eyes as he talked, his hair turning up forlornly from his neck in pale drake's tails

Lantry listened as his son spoke of the stick and-clay fireplace he had completed that day, of the cooking rack in the yard, with hooks suspended to hold pots over the fire; of the hog pen he would build, planning to make hogs his money crop The animals ran wild in scrub and swamp and hammock, fattening on pine and acorn mast, on huckleberries and palmetto berries, large and black and low growing

Lantry asked a question now and then but gave no advice Zeke was a man and able to run his own affairs He knew as much of stock raising and of farming as his father He sometimes recognised in the older man the touch of the novice, so that he wondered how he had previously earned his bread He did not ask

Zeke's wife, Ella May, said to Martha, "I seed your feller when we was to Eureka Sat'dy"

The sandy face flushed

"That sorry Syl Jacklin, I reckon"

"When you and him fixin' to take up together?"

Martha shrugged her shoulders

'I ain't in no hurry I ain't fixin' to take up at all, lessen he'll come live over here"

Lantry looked at her sharply He had not understood that the courting had gone so far.

'None o' them Jacklins likes the scrub," he said

'Well, they's one of 'em'll like it, or he won't git to marry me" She added, "And he better make me a livin', too"

Piety, almost asleep, thought, "I wouldn't figger that a-way If a man done his best"

She was aware by how narrow a margin Lantry had escaped disaster with his crops There was something about the most fertile field that was beyond control A man could work himself to skin and bones, so that there was no flesh left on him to make sweat in the sun, and a crop would get away from him There was something about all living that was uncertain

Ella May asked, "Where all's Py tee?'

Martha said, "In the bed She's been beddin' sweet pertaters I mean, she's give out Field work's too hard on her"

Mrs Lantry said, 'Hit don't hurt her none Seem to me she do it jest to git away from the housework"

Lantry rumbled angrily, 'Don't none of you know what you're talkin' about She perfeckly enjoys it She's got a knack for it, hit comes to her natural Hit's a heap harder'n the piddlin' ol' jobs to the house, but she likes it I got to have me some he'p"

Zeke asked, "Where all s Thad?"

"Acrost the river, he'pin' Abner round up some cattle. Ab's gittin' him a fine bunch o' cattle"

Zeke said, "Long as he don't keer whose calves he runs in along of his own"

'Abner wouldn't steal calves, no more than you and me!' Martha flashed at him

Zeke began to whistle indifferently.

"Mebbe not."

He said after a moment, "Ab's got him one thing I'd give a pretty for He had him more syrup and corn than he'll use, and he takened a couple o' barrels and made him the nicest ten gallons o' whiskey I ever did taste."

Ella May asked, surprised, 'Did! Where'd he git the still?'

"Used the wash pot to cook the buck Fixed him a cypress cover and daubed clay around the edge to make hit tight Fixed him a pipe outen the top, and a gutter for the pipe to run through"

'Well, I do know"

Lantry chuckled "Ella May, I ve seed stills made outen a lard pail, a hog trough and a gun barrel"

'Well, now!"

Mrs Lantry complained, "Yes, and makin' ten gallons to a time, he'll be raisin' up as bad a fuss with it as them Moss Bluff fellers'

'Sho, hit's a sight better to make hit than to buy hit" Lantry stroked his beard 'You know what you're drinkin' I'm fixin' to make me a few jugs, come fall, and my cane juice plentiful I don't use much liquor, but fifty cents a quart comes high"

"You mighty right" Zeke nodded maturely at his father.

"Ain't it agin the law, makin' whiskey?" Ella May inquired "'Pears like I've done heard somethin' 'bout hit bein' agin the law"

'I dunno," Zeke puzzled 'I cain't see why Cattle-stealin' is onlawful, and hog stealin' And murder I cain't see no harm to makin' whiskey'

Lantry stretched his long legs

"Why yes," he said, "hit's agin the law They's a tax on whiskey, a gov'mint tax You kin make it, but you belong to git a license and pay a tax But sho, nobody don't pay no mind to a feller makin' a leetle jest to drink and enjoy and treat his friends and kin folks"

He straightened, electric in the dusk

But now the gov'mint is mighty pertickler in Caroliny and West Virginny The revenooers is jest bounden determined nobody won't git to make none But sho, they jest as good to stay to home and put their noses over their own pots They cain't half ketch them fellers makin' moonshine up in them mountings. When they do come up with 'em, they're like to git buckshot in their breeches for their trouble. I mind me—"

'You been there, Pa?" Zeke leaned toward him eagerly

Lantry drew a vast breath and was silent He lit his cob pipe and sucked on it The light glowed against his beard His eyes were half closed

'I'm tellin' you what folks has tol' me," he said reprovingly 'I'll quit tellin' you, do you interrupt me"

'Well Pa, revenooers don't never mess up with nobody in these parts, do they?'

'I never heerd tell of 'em botherin' ary man Floridy is a fine state that a way Folkses here is the best in the world to mind their own business and not go interferin' in nobody else's'

Zeke said, "Dogged if I wouldn't like to make whiskey for a livin'"

Mrs Lantry slapped at her legs

'I'll be layin' a fire in the smudge pot, iffen you're fixin' to set up much longer The skeeters is a-comin'"

'Don't make no smudge, Ma" Zeke and Ella May rose 'We got to be goin' We got a half mile between us and the bed"

Piety heard the talk trailing away like fog She wanted to call after them, to say good night to Zeke, but her eyes and mouth would not open She could hear the frogs in the swamp, louder now than the voices moving toward the gate.

"Pa, how come you never made you no liquor from the cane juice before?"

"I dunno, son."

Lantry's deep tones washed over her in a last misty wave.

"Jest someway never got around to it."

IV

A FEW pine needles sifted down on the shoulders of the company assembled for the burying of Lantry's wife The man and his daughter Piety stood together, a little apart from the rest of the family, as the last spadeful of sand spattered over the grave In death the woman had been brought back across the river to the burying ground in the piney woods Lantry had turned over the stiff, fox faced body to her kin with something like relief, as though he were returning a mule or horse he had borrowed

Old man Wilson, the dead woman's father, remarked brightly, "Seven yare, nigh to the day, son Lantry, since you takened her acrost the river to live in the scrub"

Lantry nodded, stroking his beard, where a streak of silver ran like a thin shaft of lightning Piety moved closer to him

Old man Wilson continued, "You've prospered, son, and this pore dead creeter he'ped you to do so Your young uns is all growed and raisin' families, exscusin' Py-tee, and her almost twenty two"

Lantry spoke to her under his breath, "Le's go, honey. Ol' Wilson's drunk"

They turned away through the pine trees towards the river. Their rowboat rocked among bonnet-pads at the landing They stepped in and Lantry poled off silently. Martha and Zeke and Thaddeus and their families were to return to the scrub by wagon, crossing the river bridge at Eureka They watched after their father and sister Through a break in the trees they saw the big man bend

to his oars. The young woman sat facing him, her small, childlike face cupped in her hands

"Long as Pa s got Py-tee where he kin look at her," Martha said drily, "the rest of us kin live or die——"

On the scrub side of the river Lantry grounded his boat at his open landing South of Otter Landing the river bluffs flattened, and scrub met swamp in a twisting moil of briers and rattan and moccasins There was no fertile ledge of hammock. Only cypresses reared their feathery heads from gigantic bases Lantry waved his hand towards the south He gave voice to his uneasiness for the first time in seven years

"Nobody won t never slip up on us that-a way," he said

Piety blinked at him, taking her thoughts from her mother For Lantry, she sensed, there were other enemies than death They walked together up the ledge. The trail passed up through the rich darkness of hammock, across a cleared field, and through a gate in the slat fence to the house yard. They crossed the breezeway and lifted the latch into the front room Piety looked about her The house was no emptier than before. No place would be empty, she thought, with Lantry in it. The man s bulk, the fire of his presence, filled the room so certainly that his wife, returning from the grave, would have crowded it Piety stared at the hearth missing the accustomed sight of her mother sitting near the fire It was as though a sharp nosed, snappish bitch of long association was gone.

The burying had been at noon. It was now mid-after noon. Lantry and his daughter longed to go to the inter rupted work of the field They sat stiffly on a bench against the wall Her mother, Piety thought, had enjoyed so little.

In the sustaining of life were pain and pleasure. Her mother had only understood the pain Piety and Lantry and indeed most folk she knew, felt a sharp pleasure in

the details of the precarious thing that was existence. Breakfast was good, and dinner and supper, and a little snuff afterwards The tug of the plow at the arms was good, and the sight of new cane and corn sprouting green above the earth Deer, big-eyed and curious, and their spotted fawns, fox squirrels upside down on a pine tree, black-backed and glossy, flicking their tails, all the small creatures that crossed her path were good to watch She had never understood her mother s grumblings

Towards dark the creak of wagon wheels sounded down the scrub road The rest of the Lantrys were returning to their homes, Zeke, lonely because he had lost his wife in childbirth in the fall, Martha, contented with her husband, Sylvester Jacklin, and her twin babies, Thaddeus, homesteading with his bride four miles to the north The wagon halted a moment at the gate, then, as though its occupants had suddenly changed their minds, rattled on northward

Piety and Lantry breathed deeply, rose from the bench and went together to the kitchen Lantry sat by the range, tending the fire while she cooked their meal They ate in their accustomed places across from each other at the kitchen table, the space empty at the end where Mrs Lantry had sat Lantry watched Piety as she washed the dishes at the water shelf. She made quick, light movements like a quail. The man followed her with his eyes When they left the kitchen he drew his hand across her soft hair

'I ll move into the front room to sleep,' he said "You keep your mammy's bedroom"

They were exhausted and slept long and hard In the morning she heard him stirring ahead of her He was building the kitchen fire She opened her bedroom door and peered into the front room He had built a quick blaze on the hearth for her to dress by Something more than the small fire warmed her bones At breakfast Lantry

moved to the place at the end of the table They sat close together He ate silently, moving his beard, his thoughts milling behind his eyes Startled, he looked up to see Piety staring at him, her hands in her lap She smiled, moving her head a little

'What you studyin' about, watchin' your Pappy that a way?'

He poked his dull case knife at her ribs to hear her quick laugh

She wondered uneasily if he would go away to the field without her She hurried to get the dishes done, the two beds made, the mosquito bars rolled back, the floors swept, the dog and cat and chickens fed, while he did the out side chores He dallied over the stock feeding and milking until he saw her at the last of her work He came to the breezeway with two hoes

We got a day s work fightin the 'muda grass, he said

The day seemed short They hoed adjacent rows The man's long arms swung the hoe faster than her small boned ones When he found himself too far ahead of her, he turned to her row and hoed back to meet her

Mrs Lantry s illness had interfered with the routine of the house The next morning Piety felt obliged to catch up with the washing She rose long before daylight and had the clothes half rubbed and the black wash pot boiling before Lantry was up After breakfast he contrived to keep himself busy about the yard He repaired harness, drew off a new axe handle, sorted over the equipment for his muzzle loading gun Piety was using the pot water to scrub the floors The corn shucks scrub swished noisily across the rough breezeway Lantry filled his shot-bag with shot, his horn with powder, polished the hickory ramrod, gathered a handful of dried Spanish moss for wadding

'You thu, Py tee?"

"I'm thu"

"We best take the mule and wagon into the scrub for fat wood"

She took off her wet apron, put on her palmetto hat and went with him, leaving the clothes to flap on the line and the floors to dry without the usual last process of shuffling back and forth across them with a cloth under bare feet The small thin figure with its shoulders a little bent trotted beside the great bulky one

The scrub had not burned in the seven years since they had come to it The mule threaded his way through young pines and oaks higher than his ears Lantry had not been glad to see the heightening of the growth He had liked to be able to see across it for a mile or two from the cabin doorstep The mule came to a stop He could go no farther into the scrub The undergrowth was a twisted treachery Saw palmetto ripped with its barbs at hide and flesh, the refuse of old fires cluttered the infertile sand with matted limbs, stumps and logs, all laced together with thorny vines The man and woman climbed from the wagon and began to sort out scorched pine trunks, whose cores would burn like oil

'I gits a dream, sometimes," Lantry said in a low voice. "I gits takened by surprise from the river I belong to run I runs acrost the clearing and into sich a piece o' scrub as this"

The sweat started from his temples as he talked All night, he told her, when the dream rode him, he ran through the scrub, his feet interminably enmeshed in its tormented tangle

"I cain't someway put my hand to peace and comfort," he said

Her heart beat hard She braced her small feet in the high boy's shoes.

She blurted, "Pa, what you been so feered of?"

He did not answer. His breath came and went like the air in a bellows

He said at last, 'You jest as good to know Mought be some day—you and me alone this-a way—you'd have me to hide out Or lie for Honey, I killed me a gov'mint man in the up-country"

"How come you to do sich as that?"

The young voice was dispassionate, touched with a faint anxiety

'I were makin' moonshine whiskey The revenooers come messin' up with me I got my gorge up and I killed me one I lit out for the south I been right smart oneasy ever since."

She remembered a drunken man from Moss Bluff, swaying in the firelight on the night of the fence-raising, asking Lantry questions

"Does folkses around here know?'

'Don t nobody cold-out know, honey, but me and you But 'pears to me, times, like, here and there a man has someway got a idee"

'They ain t nary one takened out after you?"

'If they has, they ain t caught up with me" He added slowly, 'But all my life I got it to study on'

Her heart thumped with his. She wanted to speak She could not think of any words to comfort him She went with him inside his fear, as though together they entered some lonely place of shadows They rode home without further speech They were warm and close It was as though a skein of wool, tangled and torn, had been wound at last into a firm bright ball

The spring proved dry, and in March they planted a garden at the foot of the bluff where the swamp merged with the river, and the ground was moist without need of rain In a week turnips and collards and onions showed green against the black muck. One Saturday morning

Lantry left her to work the garden while he rowed to Eureka to trade When the dip of his oars was absorbed by the rush of the river she bent to her weeding

She was aware, with a slight acceleration of her heartbeat, of the life going on around her, the movement of alligators floundering in the creek, the slow beat of the wings of herons, the catfish jumping She worked quietly for so long that when she lifted her head she found herself looking into the close bright eyes of an astonished cat-squirrel A black swamp rabbit hopped casually by a hand's breadth away She straightened her back and walked to the lower corner of the garden to find where he had pushed through the loose rail fence She came there on the recent track of a panther She was not afraid by daylight She bent again to her work She stayed at the garden until the earth about the plants was combed as smooth as her hair, hoping that Lantry would come so that she might meet him at the swamp landing

She returned to the house and started a fire for supper. Towards sunset she heard him coming He was whistling as sweetly as a redbird She went to the door and shaded her eyes against the westerly sun Lantry was swinging across the clearing His bearded head was thrown back, his arms hung free from the shoulders, his long legs moved in time with his whistling He stopped whistling abruptly and broke into a song It was his favorite, 'Git along down" She heard him all the way across the clearing in a musical burst of thunder

> *'Git along down, git along down,*
> *Git along down to Richmond town*
> *To lay my t baccy down '*

She wondered where Richmond town might be, but by the time Lantry was at the house he was calling to her, waving his bags and bundles, and she did not remember

to ask He had gone to Eureka expressly to buy new strings for his banjo, hanging long unused under the rafters Now they were alone, he might indulge his taste for music He put the new strings on the instrument, tuned it and picked at it, trying its tone, while she cooked supper He sat in the breezeway with the setting sun in his beard and tinkled softly against the clatter of the pans

On the following Saturday he left her alone again Time seemed to hang on her hands when he was away and she occupied herself with tasks with which she seldom concerned herself She grated cassava roots and made starch and pudding The pudding was translucent like gum drops Lantry was fond of it She went a short way into the scrub and cut boughs of Highland ti ti for a new yard broom Lantry returned, his red brown eyes glowing, with a small accordion for her

She preferred to listen to him rather than to play herself, but she turned earnestly to learning the instrument It was harder than ploughing new ground to remember the difference between the two kinds of notes, and that the accordion was opened for one and closed for the other She wheezed gravely in and out, her eyes on him, the tip of her tongue between her lips, following his directions For more than a week she achieved nothing beyond distressing howls and wheezes Suddenly Lantry guffawed with a great roar, as she had not heard him since he laughed with Annie Wilson at the fence raising

"Honey," he said, "quit a twistin' that pore ol sick tomcat's tail!'

They laughed together until they were faint from it

'Here, honey, leave me show you——"

He took the accordion and closed his eyes and swayed his shoulders The music seemed to flow into him and then flow out again He played tunes she knew and tunes that were strange, songs any one could tell came from a

long way off Some were lively Others were sweet and infinitely sad Then he opened his eyes and handed her back the instrument, showing her once more the way it went

She learned finally to play with the patient steadiness of her shooting She wheezed out the hymns very well, and slow measured pieces like "Nellie Gray" She had no feeling for rhythm When she got into pieces like 'Little Brown Jug" and "Run, Nigger, Run," she stumbled and tripped over her own notes She was hopelessly lost in such dance tunes as "Hen Cackle' Sweating, with a desperate intent, she squeezed a random note here and there from the accordion in an attempt to keep the pace, until Lantry stopped her gently

'Py tee, no use to try sich as that no more Dogged if you don't double back on your own track like a run wildcat"

He accepted her peculiar timelessness at the slower pieces and they played them together with mutual satisfaction Through two springs and summers, into the second autumn, Zeke or Thaddeus or Martha, walking down the road to visit, heard the pair at their music They came on them sitting in the breezeway or before the hearth fire, absorbed in the magic of string and wind

V

In the second October after his wife's death Lantry ran *a few quarts of liquor from his cane-skimmings* He was leaning over to put more fire under the wash pot that formed the cooker of the small still, when he found it sud denly impossible to breathe Piety discovered him an hour later on the sand, still fighting for air He had torn open his shirt and was clutching with one desperate hand at his broad hairy breast She thought her own breath would stop

The viciousness of the heart attack alarmed Lantry, not for himself, but for her Lying weakly at rest on his bed while she left him a moment to fire the pot again, so as not to lose the charge, a picture came before him of that scrawny fearless figure marching through the scrub without him The blood pounded again in his throat This place of dark hammock, of swift brown river, of impenetrable scrub, became more than ever alien and unfriendly He saw the vague dangers that had never materialised against him, swallowing her up, as he had seen an alligator seize a fawn at the river's edge and drag it under There was nothing he could quite put his finger on, to be afraid of for her, but he could not endure to leave her here alone She would have to live with Martha, or keep house for widower Zeke That was no life for a woman

He saw in a new light the stupid Jacklin boy, Willy—Sylvester's cousin—who had come half-courting Piety without encouragement from either father or daughter Willy made a pretense of visiting his cousin, rowing across the

river to the scrub Then he walked up as if by accident to sit mutely with the Lantrys He was slow and strong, with a black forelock that hung between his eyes

The next time he came, when Lantry was recovered, the older man welcomed him with unaccustomed hospitality He talked to him of crops, and finding that the youth had always worked at timbering, turned amiably to a discussion of trees There was a rumour that a Palatka lumber company might buy cypress rights along the river and put in crews to timber and raft Lantry brought out the straw-covered demi john of his last whiskey and asked young Jacklin's opinion on its flavour

The youth said, 'I ain t much for it," but he tipped up the jug and took an obliging swallow "That's noble liquor, Mr Lantry," he said earnestly

Lantry took a deep drink, wiped his mouth and beard, set down the jug and started away

"I ll jest go on and visit with Marthy and Syl a whiles," he said 'I figger you young folks don't want no interferin'

Piety's puzzled eyes followed him as he walked across the yard and out of the gate When Lantry came home again, the moon rode high over the scrub The narrow road was a silver ribbon He was half way home when he met Piety and Willy He thought with satisfaction that it was a fine night for courting Piety turned and walked back with him and Willy went on alone

When they were out of hearing Lantry said, "That's a fine young feller Couldn't git you no nicer young feller ' The girl did not speak 'Honey, he done said ary thing yit about you marryin'?"

"Nary thing, Pa" She looked at him astonished.

He took her thin arm and squeezed it playfully

'He jest been courtin', that it? Talkin' sweet? Puttin' his arm around you, or kissin', or sich as that?"

Her deep lidded eyes were round Willy had spoken two or three times after Lantry's going, and then only about the saw mill at Palatka He had not moved from the spot where Lantry left him, until she had suggested that they walk down the road and meet her father He had jumped up then like a hound told to come or go

'Well, I be dogged!" Lantry spat violently into the myrtle bushes "I jest be dogged"

He said no more that night Looking at him in the bright moonlight as they went up the lane to the house, she could not read his eyes She went to bed in a daze For the first time she did not understand him The next morning Lantry paced the breezeway after breakfast and did not go to his work He waited until she had finished her straightening of the cabin

'Py tee! Come here"

She settled herself on the stoop while he walked back and forth, his hands clasped behind him, his beard sunk on his chest

'You ever studied on gittin' married?"

"When Marthy married Syl, I studied some on it Not lately, I ain't"

"Willy's foolishly fond of you, Py-tee" He glared at her sternly "He jest don't say much, is all ails him, but he's rarin' to git you"

She blinked at him

"Would you have him, iffen he was to ask you?"

"I dunno I ain't studied none on it."

He paced up and down

"You like him a'right, Py tee?"

"I reckon I like him"

He took a fresh start

"Honey, you like to be powerful lonesome thouten no young uns Don't you fancy a passel o' the leetle fellers?"

She laughed "I ain't much for dandlin' 'em Always

'peared to me young uns don't love to be dandled Time they gits some size to 'em, I likes 'em a'right"

The chill thought struck her that Lantry was lonely. Perhaps he intended to move down with Martha, whose family was begun Perhaps he planned to go back where he had come from, to the strange places where he had learned the tunes he played and the songs he sung Her throat tightened

She asked bluntly, "You fixin' to go off?"

He laid his hands on her shoulders, so that the pulse of his blood warmed them

He said gently, 'Not if I kin he'p it, Py tee I don't aim to leave you long as I has the say A man cain t always he p hisself when hit comes to goin' or to comin' or to dyin'"

She understood She nodded

He said, 'A man o' your own's natural Seems like ever' thing go along better when you do what's natural"

She asked, What you want I should do?"

'Nothin' you don't r'aly want to But if Willy suits you, I say take him"

"He suits me good as ary feller, I reckon"

He held her shoulders an instant longer, then turned abruptly to his work

Willy came again on Sunday evening, bringing a gift of bass from the river The older man met him at the gate They walked together back of the house and began to dress the fish while the scales were moist

Lantry said, 'Willy, mebbe you know, Py-tee thinks right smart o' you."

The youth flushed "I'm shore proud to hear it"

'I don't aim to ask you nothin' you got no fancy for answerin', but if she was willin', would you care for marryin'?"

"Yes sir, I'd be mighty proud"

"Well you jest say to her then, Py tee, you say, hit's all fixed we should marry And you see what she has to say"

'I'll do that thing, Mr Lantry Much obliged"

Lantry called towards the house 'Py tee, fetch a pan for the fish Willy carried you" He set off for the road He turned back "Willy, you be foolishly fond of her, ain't you? You be rarin' for her?'

Young Jacklin shuffled his feet in the sand

'I reckon, sir Why, sho"

Lantry's uneasiness lifted He went whistling to Mar tha's When he returned, he found the matter arranged

"Py tee said, 'All right, then,'' Willy greeted him He poked an intimate finger in her ribs 'Didn t you, Py tee?'

"That's what I said '

Lantry said, 'That s fine"

The three sat in silence on the stoop

A month later Lantry fetched the preacher from Eureka by rowboat Piety and Willy Jacklin were married at Martha's, with a few of the Wilson and Jacklin kin pres ent from across the river Abner and his wife came, bring ing a gift of a quarter of beef and a bolt of unbleached muslin Abner was doing well with cattle He and his wife were growing stout and florid with prosperity Martha had sewed new shifts and nightgowns and aprons for her sister and had cooked a wedding supper of chicken pilau and pound cake, served with elderberry wine There were no festivities and the group broke up before dark Willy and Piety walked back up the scrub road to the Lantry cabin Lantry would stay a few days with Martha

'Give the young folks a chancet to git acquainted and settle down to their reg lar ways, he said Let 'em see do they figger on quarrellin', then I kin come in and say who's right

There was no quarrelling Willy went slowly about the work of the Lantry place, amiable and silent. Lantry came

home a week later, as eager as a lost dog Piety looked from her father to Willy and back again, as though to understand why Lantry had encouraged his inclusion in the family She felt a detached affection for her husband, but when he was out of her sight she seldom thought of him They had moved into the wide bed with the high mosquito bar that her father and mother had occupied It seemed to her that she was picking up in the middle something that had been interrupted But if there was a meaning she could not find it

Willy had a way of sleeping curled up like a dog, his head deep in his chest, one arm over his face She awakened one night after Lantry s return, when the hoot-owls were crying in the moonlight, and looked at the doubled up figure breathing beside her She thought that it might just as well be a dog curled up in the bed for all the difference it made to her, one way or the other A good dog, that fetched and carried as she told him

With Willy s broad stupid back bent easily to the harder tasks, Lantry felt a secret triumph It was as though, with his back to the wall, he had stood up to the forces that beat against him and had defeated them A man s life was not his own, nor the time or manner of his dying He moved like a cedar chip on the breast of the river like a chicken feather lifted by a high wind The man felt, securing this safety for the child for whom he knew such tenderness, stronger than the river or the wind

VI

LANTRY's impatience with Willy Jacklin began two years later when Piety's boy was born It was as though in that moment the man's slow usefulness was ended He infuri ated Lantry on the day of the birth Piety had mistaken her time When, alone in the house with his wife, a heavy agony overtook her, Willy's mind was unable to accept the fact of her travail, since by the calendar it was not yet due The woman paced the floor of the cabin, her small swol len figure teetering grotesquely The man stood bewil dered in the doorway, watching her knife struck progres sions.

He asked, What you figger ails you, Py tee?'

'Must be I m took, Willy I ain t never been with nary woman when she was took I ll see kin I walk the pains off

The man twisted his hands together, his black forelock shaggy between his eyes

Be it better?'

"Nary a mite"

Beads of sweat stood out on her temples

"What you figger I d best do, Py tee?'

She must use her last breath, she thought, to order him to come or go

Go call Pa'

He went to the landing where Lantry was repairing a boat, calling him from the ledge as he came towards him. Lantry made out the words Py-tee's ailin'," and began to run up the bluff with long reaching strides. He was at the cabin ahead of Willy

'Honey, what's it like?"

She gripped his sleeve and described the hot pain that swelled to the unbearable, held its crest, like a kettle about to boil over, and then in time receded

"You're took, Py tee It were that a way with your Ma" He said over his shoulder, "She's took, Willy" He felt her hands They were numb and cold 'You best lay down and git you warm Hit don't do to git all froze up, like" He settled her on her bed and covered her with the white spread 'You kin quilt with the counterpane 'til time to git you undressed"

He came to the door Willy stood as he had left him Lantry roared at him

"Great God, feller, don't stand there a battin' your eyes at me! Git to Doc Lorimer! Don't make no difference what he's doin', carry him back here!"

Willy hesitated

"Take the mule and wagon?'

'Oh, my God—hit'd take you all the day! Fetch him in the rowboat!'

Willy turned away He had had time to reach the edge of the hickory ledge Lantry saw him coming back towards the cabin Willy called from the rear gate.

'Is the oar locks in the boat?"

Lantry's blood surged into his head and pushed against his temples His face was violent, the color of old beef His red beard glowed, the streaks of silver like tongues of white hot flame. His eyes were on fire He ran to the farm-bell lashed to an eight foot post and tolled it wildly It would bring Zeke and Martha from their half mile and two miles away Martha would help Piety while he was gone

He passed Willy at the gate in a rush He was like a red bull ploughing furiously across time and space Willy

heard him in a few moments, clanking the chain of the rowboat, rattling the oar locks The oars dipped noisily into the shallow water by the river-bank Then, an instant later, the deep whisper of the river current engulfed all sound

Lantry was gasping for breath when he landed Lorimer at the foot of the bluff He hurried him to the cabin, where the woman laboured with a child too brawny for her spare loins Willy crouched unhappily on his haunches in the yard, flipping a knife into the sand Martha moved *quietly back and forth with hot towels Lantry went into* the bedroom

"Is it bad, honey?"

"Hit's bad"

The turtle like lids of her eyes were blue with pain Lantry could not endure to look at her He moistened his lips

"You afeered, Py tee?"

The small head moved a little on the pillow.

"I ain't afeerd"

"Kin you stand it?"

'*What don't kill you, I figger you kin stand.*"

He left the room precipitously Martha's square frame passed him Her eyes narrowed

"*You never had nary doctor for Ma in the child-bed,*" she said with a rare bitterness 'You made nary visit to me two years ago when my Cleve come, 'til he were a day two old Now the way you carries on——"

He said hoarsely, "She's so scrawny and so leetle."

The woman's voice softened

"I know, Pa Hit's perfeckly piteeful"

The sun set, dropping behind the ledge The full moon rose over the scrub

Martha said, "Hit'll be a boy, comin' on the full moon."

Lorimer said, "I'll be dogged if I see how you women-folks figure the moon when it comes to birthin' young uns. Don't none of you go that high to get one"

Piety pressed her lips together, so that a sharp cry slipped out only now and then against her will Moonlight filled the cabin The boy was born Martha wrapped the new Jacklin in old soft muslin Lorimer joined Zeke and Willy in the kitchen They ate cold rations and drank cold coffee; stretched and laughed and chatted The job was done and they talked of other things Birth and death were unimportant, being only a beginning and an end

Lantry did not appear in the kitchen Lorimer, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, passed through the main room on his way again to Piety He found Lantry half-conscious on his bed

When he had eased the man, he said, "Shame to you, Lantry Tryin' to get two treatments for the price of one I ve got the notion to charge you double"

Zeke said, "He like to rowed the guts outen him, I reckon, the time he made a fetchin' you"

'Yes," Martha said shortly, "and railin' out at pore Willy didn't he'p him none, neither Willy says he like to went crazy when he come askin' him was the oar locks to the boat"

Willy offered mildly, "'Peared to me like 'twere savin' time to come ask, 'stead o' gittin' there and findin' 'em back to the house"

Lantry smiled weakly, rubbing the sore battleground of his breast

"I had no right to take on so, son Hit jest put me in a blaze to see you standin' still"

Lorimer said, "Another of them pets'll finish you"

Lantry did not see Piety's baby until after sun up the next morning Then he was able, holding to Willy's

shoulder, to walk slowly into the bedroom, breathing as though his breath were of spun glass Piety lay still exhausted, her closed lids white over her eyes The child slept beside her Above the wrinkled face the silky birth hair was the red-brown of Lantry s The man slipped one cautious finger into the diminutive fist The woman opened her eyes She smiled a little

She said faintly, 'Reckon us kin make a livin for him?'

'Shore kin Ten twelve yare, anyways, and then if we ve done raised him right, he kin make it for us"

His deep laugh shook the bed

'What you fixin' to name him, Py tee?'

Willy shuffled his feet near the head of the bed

'I studied some on namin' him 'Lantry',' she said "Kin call him 'Lant'"

"Lantry Jacklin," he said slowly

Piety spoke politely to her husband

'That suit you, Willy?"

He twisted his black forelock

"Hit's as good a name as ary other, I reckon."

'Hi yuh, you leetle ol' Lant" Lantry stroked the baby's stomach "Got you red hair like your grand-daddy, you booger"

A heat flowed through his body, through the woman, to the child It was as though it belonged to him and not to Willy

He said slowly, "Kin make him a livin' all right, Py-tee, if nothin' don't interfere. You got the say so fur, and then you got no say at all."

VII

LANTRY and his grandson Lant sat on a fallen log beside the timber trail that wound through the upper swamp At their backs the ledge of hammock sheered steeply against the sky Piety was hunting squirrels in the hickories Below them in the swamp and on the river sounded the racket of timbering It was incredibly noisy after the years of silence The Murkley Cypress Company had come up the Ocklawaha eight years ago, in the year young Lant was born Their presence still irked Lantry The blows of axe on cypress struck on his ears with a sharpness keener than sound He shook his bearded head impatiently Young Lant looked at him curiously

At eight years of age the boy had his father's heavy forelock that dropped between his eyes, but it was dark red, like Lantry's His neck was long and thin and the thick hair made him top heavy His head, with its red-brown eyes staring like those of a deer, might have gone on a twelve year body He was all head and eyes and neck The spindling frame might some day equal Lantry's in height, but the massive bulk would not be there Something about the country to which the grandfather had brought his blood to breed, pared down progeny to a square jointed leanness Lant edged closer to the old man

"Le's go yonder to the timberin' and see kin we ketch Pa workin' on a jog board"

"You set still Your Ma won't know where to look for us, time she's done huntin'"

"I got no mind to set still," the boy said belligerently.

He glared at Lantry and for an instant the man glared back at him They were much alike and the two minds met in mid-air, like game cocks, and clashed But Lantry was gentler with his age upon him.

After a moment his red lips parted through his beard in a smile, and he said quietly, "Set right still and Grand daddy'll tell you about the up-country And about the world"

"What's the world?"

The man ruminated His eyes twinkled

"Well, son," he said, 'I ain't never travelled no direction but south But if so hit's the same in tother directions, why, all I got to say, the world's a big place and a lot o' people in it'

The boy frowned blackly

"*That ain't no tale Tell me about niggers*"

The subject fascinated the child, for there was only one negro in the scrub, an ex slave to whom his master had given land in Florida The negro kept to himself in an old house

"Niggers," Lantry said, "is borned male and female, like squirrels and dogs and white folks Niggers is all shades o' black and brown and yaller" He closed his eyes, as though recalling a picture He sang softly

"Massa had a yaller gal,
Brought her from the South
She combed her hair so very tight
She could not close her mouth.

Her head was like a coffee pot,
Her nose was like the spout
Her mouth was like the fireplace
With the ashes taken out."

The child shouted with laughter

"That's 'Git along down,' ain't it?"

"You got it right, son That's the song"

Lantry leaned his back against a palmetto trunk, scratching his shoulder blades

"I mind me of a big buck nigger in North Caroliny, had one glass eye—"

He smiled to himself The boy, watching him raptly, saw the lids droop, the big head nod The old man had fallen asleep Lant jumped angrily on a dry palmetto frond, hoping it would rouse him His grandfather infuriated him Lantry went to sleep with a story half told He was ignorant, too, of most of the things the boy wanted to know He had wanted to ask him if squirrels could swim He decided that his grandfather would only have said, "Blest if I know" He would ask his Uncle Zeke Better, he would remember to ask old man Paine, the mighty hunter who lived across the scrub and brought them presents of bear meat and venison

He walked a few cautious feet away from the sleeping man His movement went unheard He wheeled like a yearling deer and ran down the trail towards the swamp He picked a vantage point high on a cable trail He could see the pull boat anchored with iron stakes on the opposite side of the river He could see the company house boat above Otter Landing The boat lay quiet now, but last Saturday, after dark, it had been bright with lights and the sound of men singing and playing His father had lived on the boat before the timbering came close to the Lantry land

Through the dense upper swamp Lant thought he could identify a man driving a wedge into a cypress as Willy Jacklin His father's hanging black forelock shook like a horse's mane with the force of the blows The noise of

the timber outfit hummed in Lant s ears He heard the shouts of men above distant axes and cross-cut saws The drum on the pull boat chattered the gears ground and creaked A steam whistle blew, the engine puffed and chugged The great cypress began to fall Three hundred feet away he saw a trembling in the dark canopy that was the tree tops over the swamp There came a ripping, as woody cells, inseparable for a century, were torn violently one from another The tree crashed, flattening every thing in its path, and the roar of the fall went like a roll of thunder through swamp and hammock and scrub The boy thought there was a hush after the last echo, as though the men waited before they began to trim and saw, watching the tree like a great prone animal that might not be entirely dead

When he was a man, he decided, he would not timber His father, his father's cousin Sylvester, and his Uncle Thaddeus had been timbering since the year he was born They seemed stupid, puny creatures to him, to be felling and rafting the giants of the swamp He would raise cattle, like his Uncle Abner, or become a hunter like old man Paine, or make whiskey as his Uncle Zeke was doing The thought of hunting reminded him that he had not heard his mother's gun in some time He scrambled to his feet and trotted back over the trail Piety, coming down the hammock ledge towards her father, saw the boy moving in, with a curious air of rapt detachment, on a line converging with hers

Lantry was still asleep He looked old His mind still ran pursued down dark roadways This, she thought, and not the wear of time on the bulky body, had weakened him She felt concerned about his frailty, as he had once concerned himself with hers. She was small and scrawny, as she had always been But she felt within herself a rooted

strength, like that of a small plant sucking at the earth with deep tentacles Between her father and her son she was strong and comforted

Lant's eyes shone as his mother fished out squirrels from the pockets of the man's jacket she wore There were ten The boy gathered the limp grey bodies together and tip toed on bare feet to his grandfather He piled them on the sleeping man's lap and against his breast When he laid one on either side of Lantry s neck, the man wakened with a start and leaped to his feet, scattering dead squirrels like leaves Piety chuckled and the child shouted

'Dog take it," Lantry said, "I figgered I'd done woke up in a nest o' varmints"

The boy sobered

'Squirrels is varmints, ain't they?"

"I reckon so I had it right A nest o' varmints is jest what 'twas"

They laughed together The man and boy were friendliest when the woman was with them A turbulent stream flowed into a quiet pond and another flowed out of it One violence did not meet the other The boy carried the squirrels against his chest He went ahead of Piety and Lantry Where the hammock met the clearing, he stopped short He pointed with a stubby brown toe to fresh deer tracks

"A doe and a fawn,' he said excitedly 'Ma, le's track the boogers and you shoot 'em"

The fawn, in the early fall, must be past the spotted stage and at its best for eating Piety turned to Lantry

"Reckon hit's ary use to try and foller? I ain't much for trackin'"

"The boy's a fine tracker," he said indulgently "Le's go a piece, anyways"

The trail led in plain sight along the edge of the clearing, across the road and into the scrub Piety hung the

squirrels in the crotch of a tree They crept along in single file Lant led the way, pointing out the tracks They went a long way into the scrub It was the farthest either Piety or Lantry had come on foot

The trees grew thickly, like trees in a dream, and there were no shadows, because all the scrub was shadow The scrub was unreal They had left behind the road, the hammock and the river Human life was left behind, and human safety Nothing was here but thin pines and blackjacks, with scrub palmettos thick and hindering underneath They could scarcely walk for the low growth Piety could see no further track, but the boy insisted it was plain Where the underbrush was thickest they heard once the faint whirr of a rattler All three stood breathless for a long time. At last the boy, shaking himself free from his mother s hand on his shoulder, pointed a cautious foot ahead There was no further sound The snake had slipped away

The trail led into the rough, a patch of ground that had been lately burned, and the fire put out by rains. The area here was as the scrub had been in front of Lantry s clearing when he first moved from across the river The new growth was low and tangled, matted with stumps and burned trees Because the strip was narrow, the three continued across it It led into old scrub, scrub whose tall pines were bent by the storm of '71 The pines grew openly, with stretches carpeted with coarse grass, dotted with the grey green of sweet myrtle bushes, of rosemary and sea myrtle.

The doe and fawn were here, bedding The doe leaped up ahead of them The fawn lurched to its feet and turned immense wondering eyes. Piety cocked her gun and levelled it, exerted her strength to pull the stiff trigger She was slow The fawn and doe were gone

The child went into a rage He stamped his foot on the

ground like an infuriated bull yearling He spat, as he had seen Lantry do His red brown eyes glared at his mother He seized the heavy gun from her hands and tried to put it to his shoulder to fire in the direction of the deer's retreat He could not lift it. He stared at it His fury subsided as quickly as it had come

Lantry said gently, "Never you mind, son Granddaddy'll git you a leetle gun you kin tote and shoot all by yourself"

The child nodded "Then I kin trail alone"

They turned to go home They walked silently for half a mile, each with his own thoughts The child was in the rear, following without attention, his head poked forward on his long neck Lantry halted

"Py tee," he said in a low voice, "this ain't right"

She looked at him, her hand half over her mouth

"I cain't never find my way here, Pa," she said "I figgered you knowed the way"

"*I figgered so too But I ain't never been much in these* parts I got no hankerin' to be in the scrub no time Le's try up here a ways, see I in we hit us a trail back"

They went farther The scrub deepened They were lost Lantry mopped his forehead with his bandana Piety took out her snuff box from her blouse and lipped a pinch for encouragement

Lantry said, "No use, daughter, I got nary idee where we're at"

The child jerked himself out of his reveries

You all fixin' to go home?" he asked abruptly

"Soon's we kin find the way," Lantry answered

Lant craned his neck

He said, "Lift me up so's I kin see"

He pointed from Lantry's shoulder

"Yonder's the river," he said

He set out ahead of them The man and woman looked at each other.

Piety asked, "Reckon he know?"

Lantry said, 'How kin he know!'

But the eight year-old back ahead of them had a surety that drew them One way was as good now as another In a brief time they came out on the road that marked scrub from hammock They could hear faintly the sounds of the timbering They had been near home all the time The boy turned to the right, striding brusquely

'Son," Lantry called, "how come you to know the way?'

The boy pointed to the ridge at his left

"Why," he said impatiently, I could see the tops o' them big trees yonder Them s hickories Ain't none o' them in the scrub Ain't hickories nowhere exscusin' right along above the river"

They retrieved their squirrels and approached the clearing They saw three women and some children waiting for them on the stoop Martha came down the fenced in lane to meet them Behind her were Thaddeus' wife and Zeke's wife, Lulu Zeke had married Dan Wilson's widow He was a gentle step-father to her girl-child, Kezzy

Lulu had not been friendly after she married Zeke Piety and Lantry had not seen the girl in some months Kezzy was ten years old, with a milk white skin, great black eyes and smooth black hair that hung over her shoulders in stiff braids She was square-built and quiet Piety was struck at once with her resemblance to some one she had known and liked Lantry studied the child, stroking his beard

"Lemme see—Annie Wilson were aunt to this gal young un. That right, Lulu?"

Lulu said, primly belligerent, "Annie were Dan's sister, all right Her and Dan's buried side by side right now I

were always proud Dan never had none of Annie's crazy ways'

"Annie Wilson were a fine woman," Lantry said quietly He turned to his daughter Martha

"What you women folks studyin' about? Clustered on my stoop like hens with your biddies"

Martha smiled, smoothing back her sandy hair She laid a hand on the shoulder of her oldest living child, the boy Cleve He was ten, the age of Kezzy, a pasty faced boy, sullen, inclined to a round puffiness Four younger girls twisted their hands into the woman's full calico skirt

'Well, Pa," she answered him, "We been wonderin' wasn't you goin' to start Lant in to the school this year If you was, we figgered couldn't we git you all to tote the hull mess o' young uns acrost the river in the rowboat"

Lantry said, "We been talkin' about it I been learnin' him since he were six He do pretty good now at the read in' I reckon 'tain't the same as reg lar schoolin', though'

Lant said, "I cain't go to school I'm fixin' to hunt this winter"

The man stroked the boy's head and studied him thoughtfully Piety could not endure to have the boy all day across the river, sitting unwilling at desk and bench

'He ll perfeckly hate it," she said 'You jest as good to put a wild cat to the books"

The boy Cleve grinned, exposing his gums

"He'll be a varmint shore, if you don't learn him somethin' more'n runnin' in the scrub"

Lantry said, 'We got it to do, Py tee" He nodded at the women "Leave us know the day school is due to commence Have all the young uns is to go, at the Landin' soon of a mornin' Py tee and me between us kin tote 'em and fetch 'em back agin"

Relieved, they talked a while of the timbering, of fall

crops and hogs, then took their leave The girl Kezzy passed close to Lant

She said in a low voice, "You won't hate it the least bit, time you git used to it"

Lantry watched after her, smiling

He nodded to Piety, 'She shore favors her aunt Annie"

Suddenly Piety was watching again a big man and woman scuffling sand in the dance, fat wood torches flickered and she was sitting close to Annie Wilson, hearing the rich laugh, smelling the sweet musk of the big sweating body When the stoop under her took shape again, her eyes came to rest on the boy His head was thrown back like a deer's at sound of the dogs His nostrils quivered He glared impartially at her, at Lantry, and in the direction of his kin plodding down the lane

"I be dogged,' he said, "if I aim to mess up with no school no longer'n I have to."

VIII

THE two years of school on which Lantry insisted, passed for the boy Lant in a dull torment By the spring in which he was ten years old, he had learned to read and write and to figure enough to make change in money He had learned as well to pass the brief winter sessions in the unresisting aloofness of a caged animal that has found there is no escape

The second year was over and done with On an afternoon in April he followed Kezzy and his cousins out of the schoolhouse and down the road through the pineywoods to the river landing where his mother waited for them with the rowboat The girl of twelve hummed under her breath Cleve was hilarious and chased the smaller children around the pine trees Lant was preoccupied

He was thinking about squirrels He had thought about them a great deal He could tell young squirrels from old ones and females from males There were squirrels in between that were neither male nor female Old man Paine the hunter said it was to keep off too much fighting The male squirrels were fighting now, for they were mating That morning, coming through the hammock, he had seen one big grey male attacked by three They had baited him one at a time, while the female watched bright-eyed from a crotch

He had long wondered whether squirrels could swim; whether they could swim across the fierce sweep of the river current Now, as the children settled themselves in the rowboat and Piety picked up the oars to swing out into

the river, he saw that a grey cat squirrel was rocking back and forth on the trunk of a palm, poising to jump into the water The palmetto was fifty feet high and curved in almost as sharp an arc as a sapling trap The bent top leaned part way across the river The woman settled to her rowing The squirrel leaped His jump, with his tail spread behind him, carried him more than half way across the stream He paddled madly the rest of the way to the east shore and was out of sight with a whisk The boy grunted to himself

"Kin swim like Hell," he said under his breath with satisfaction

Kezzy asked, 'What you see now?"

He frowned and dabbled his fingers indifferently over the side of the boat

"Jest a ol' squirrel"

Piety said, "You young uns has got all your books and sich I best to carry you thu the creek"

Kezzy said, Tis a sight closer, Aunt Py tee, but I hates to see you polin' thu sich a thick place Leave Cleve take the boat thu the swamp" She added, looking at him, 'You big ol' lazy, you"

He grinned at her but did not repeat her offer

At the entrance to the creek the woman laid down her oars and stood up in the stern to pole The channel narrowed in the swamp It doubled back on itself, winding about obstructions of rotted stumps and fallen logs It was gloomy; almost without light The boat slipped under the arching growth like a water-bug The boy Lant drew a deep breath He reached for a leaf of flea myrtle and crushed its spiced sweetness against his nose He leaned his cheek against the board seat so that he might peer into the ends of hollow logs for a sight of hidden alligator or coiled moccasin

The creek spread flat and shallow in the overhanging

swamp Piety poled the boat between cypress knees The children jumped out on hummocks of dark muck Piety tied the boat to a cypress and laid the oars behind a clump of bushes Lant gathered a handful of twigs and crouched a step at a time along the swamp edge He drew in his breath and let it out again with a puff, hurling his sticks in the water A gurgle sounded above the ripples he had made, and a wider ring spread across the brown water. Cleve called after him

"What you chunkin' sticks at?"

"Leetle ol' 'gator"

"More'n likely a catfish," the older boy said.

Lant shook his head

"I seed his big ol eyes"

He cut up the steep ledge at an angle from the others, following a narrow trail among the live-oaks and hickories and magnolias The April sunlight, so fiercely strident in the open, was defeated by the dark hammock and filtered in thin patches to the ground The earth here was cool Ferns were moist and sweet scented and fungus sprouted, sometimes in alabaster sprays like unearthly flowers He broke one off, smelled of its loamy must, touched his tongue to the stem, splintered like crystal; remembered old man Paine's warning against poisonous herbs and threw it down

From the north the sound of the timbering came faintly The crews had passed the Lantry land and were working beyond Zeke Lantry's homestead Thad Lantry and Willy and Sylvester Jacklin still worked with them There sounded the dull clang of wedges being driven Then the boy heard the muffled crash of a tree From the thickness of the sound he judged it to have been a dead fall, taking the top of another tree with it He reached the top of the ridge, where the hammock broke abruptly into the Lantry clearing Piety and Cleve and Kezzy and the small

children were entering the field below him Ahead, he saw Lantry s tall form moving about the yard

He was suddenly conscious that instead of the renewed activity that usually followed a feeling, there had been a silence Now he heard one man "Halloo-o-o-o," and another take up the cry The steam whistle on the pull-boat burst into a long drawn scream Piety cupped her mouth with her small hands and called shrilly across the field

Lant! You go see what's the matter"

He dropped his books on the sand and loped down through the hammock towards the timbering He had run half a mile when he heard the voices of men come close On the trail he met his uncles, Thaddeus and Sylvester, and two of the piney woods Jacklins They were carrying among them a large bundle wrapped in their clothing Thad was naked to his waist, white skinned and thin His blue work shirt with one sleeve dangling held the bundle under the middle Blood soaked through it as from fresh venison in a sack The men looked at one another

Thad said, "Son, you jest as good to know now, hit's your daddy"

The boy blinked He remembered the heavy crash of cypress

'Was it him caught in the dead fall?"

'It were him"

The men laid the bundle on the ground Thad wiped the sweat from his throat, passed his hand down the hollow between his ribs, leaving a streak of grime, shook his hand, so that small drops spattered on a palmetto frond by the trail

One of the Jacklins said, "I never figgered Willy no big kind of a man, but the pore feller's as heavy totin' as a buck in the scrub"

Another said, 'It'll pussle us to git him home.'

The boy stared at the bundle Syl Jacklin looked at him

He were slow, son," he said solemnly 'Cousin Willy were always slow Hit don't do to be slow too clost to no dead fall'

Lant asked slowly, 'Is he done dead?'

Thad said, If we hadn t of knowed 'twas Willy was there, nobody wouldn t never of knowed who 'twas, after" He spat to the side of the trail 'Son, I don t know what Pytee kin do about a fitten buryin' They jest ain't enough o Willy to fix nice in the coffin Le s go, boys'

They lifted the bundle by its four corners The boy followed behind His stomach hurt him He remembered his father, slow and quiet, with his black forelock between his eyes He tried to imagine a man smashed by a deadfall, he would be flat, like smoked mullet He could make the two pictures of his father but he could not fit them together

He ran ahead of the men to open gates for them into the clearing They passed through the garden into the yard His mother walked slowly towards them, twisting her apron between her hands Lantry stood by a chair on the breezeway, holding to its back

Willy?' she asked

Thad nodded

'Take him in to the bed," she said

Lantry watched after them, trembling as they passed him In the bedroom the men hesitated

Sylvester said, "Better git a ol' quilt to lay under——'

The woman said, "The mattress don't matter Hit's jest corn shucks."

Lantry came to the doorway, leaning heavily against the frame

How come it to happen?" he asked

'The pore feller were slow, Pa," Thaddeus said 'He someway wa'n't payin' no mind when the tree were throwed"

The blood in Lantry's face grew purple His templ-s pulsed

"God damn his sorry hide," he said hoarsely

The men raised from their disposing of the lacerated mass on the bed They gaped at him

'Hit s jest like the fool to make a pore widder woman o' Py tee before her time He's a no account white man, dead or alive——"

His breath grew short He choked He put one hand to his throat and clawed at his windpipe Piety left the side of the bed and came to him

'Pa—you re gittin yourself in a turrible fix '

Lant, by the window, saw that she was more concerned for the living man than for the dead She led him to his bed and loosened his shirt The three Jacklins talked together in the bedroom Sylvester came alone to the woman

'Py tee,' he said, 'we ll jest go on and take Willy acrost the river for the buryin He flushed 'A Jacklin ain t beholden to nobody'

Lantry was fighting for breath The woman began to pour whiskey a drop at a time down his throat His mouth was open, like a fish on a line When his throat was full, the whiskey began to trickle out again She called to her brother

'Thad! You do what s right about Willy I cain t leave Pa He won't never come out of this un'

He nodded to the other men They passed through the room with the wet bundle Lant heard their voices in the yard, then the movement of a mule and the sound of the wagon rattling down the road He moved across the room to Lantry s bed The man was black with agony A few minutes before the end he drew a comfortable breath or two He knew that he was done for He clenched Piety s wrist until it swelled in his grip He jerked his head to-

wards the boy, big-eyed and white of face at the foot of the bed

He said hoarsely, "He ll look out for you, Py tee ' He gasped ' This place—suit him He kin make a livin' here —somehow "

He closed his eyes His chin sagged, spreading his beard on his chest Suddenly he reared bolt upright in the bed Terror wiped out his pain His red eyes rolled He fell back on his pillow A crafty expression came over the glazing face He had, after everything, gotten safely away He plunged panting into the cool dark retreat of death He whispered over his shoulder to old pursuing phantoms

"Run, you bastards, run!"

IX

Sorrow was like the wind It came in gusts, shaking the woman She braced herself She closed her eyes against the sight of the dead man His set features were aquiline, the yellow of bee s wax above the streaked red beard Safe from his fear, he looked noble and at peace Pain swept across her in a gale. The deep lidded eyes blinked She shook her small head to be rid of her torment

Suddenly Piety remembered her son He had gone away as Lantry fought for his last breath She went across the breezeway into the kitchen He sat on a low bench before the stove He was trembling as a frightened puppy trembles She had not seen him afraid before Lantry s fear was tangible in the moment of his dying, and a cold breath had blown in on the boy from a distant land She sat beside him The wood fire was almost out and she reached across him for a stick of pine He handed her splinters to make a blaze and after they had sat together a while his trembling stopped

A little after sunset the front gate clicked and steps sounded on the stoop Zeke Lantry and his step-daughter Kezzy came into the room and Piety went to meet them Zeke took his sister s hand gravely and walked with her to look down at his father The drake's-tails fluttered on his neck His pale blue eyes watered and he blew his nose He had spilled fermented mash on his trousers and the odour rose about him in a sour wave

'I ran off a charge this evenin'," he said 'I were jest crossin' the river from the outfit, jugs and all, when a raft

o' logs passed me and the men hollers to me Willy were dead and Pa were dyin' Hit takened me so I like to turned the boat over"

She asked, "Where's Marthy and Lulu and Nellie?"

"Marthy don't dast leave the house She sent word you was havin' trouble enough without she should take to the child bed on you" He blew his nose again "Sis, my Lulu and Thad s Nellie, they right-out say they ll not put foot in your house again They both got Jacklin blood and they're sayin' mighty hard things about you and Pa I say, Pa wa'n't hisself, and you cain't hold a dyin' man's words agin him I say, you done right lookin' after him, with Willy to where mortal hand couldn't raise to he'p him The dead's dead, but the breath o' life is the breath o' life"

He cleared his throat, pulled out a plug of tobacco, looked at it and shoved it hastily back into his pocket

Kezzy asked in a low voice, "Where's Lant, Aunt Py tee?"

"To the kitchen The young un's had a perfeck fright."

The girl walked away with her eyes averted from the sight of Lantry She found Lant feeding the fire and stroking the head of Lantry's small mongrel dog

"Hey, Lant"

"Hey, Kezzy."

She went to him and put her hand on his shoulder, leaning over him so that her long smooth braids hung against his flat chest He shook away

"Git them ol' black snakes outen my way," he said

They laughed He drew a deep breath. He realized that he was hungry.

"Kezzy," he whispered, "don't nobody eat no supper when folkses die?"

"You ain't had nothin'?"

She was not familiar with the kitchen Her mother had

discouraged intimacy between the two families, through jealousy that the Lantry land was plainly to pass to Piety instead of the sons But she foraged in the kitchen safe and fried the boy cold biscuits and warmed squirrel meat and rice together He ate ravenously She lit a kerosene lamp and sat beside him Piety and Zeke talked in low tones in the front room

Zeke called to Kezzy and they went away Lant sat *alone in the kitchen until he nodded Through the door*way he could see his mother sitting motionless A shaft of lamplight lay across her pointed face and on the small knotted hands He did not want to see his grandfather again He moved without sound into his bedroom off the breezeway, undressed as far as his underwear and got into his bed After a time he heard his mother stir in the front room Then she too went to bed

The woman was dropping off to an unhappy sleep when she heard a sound as of a small animal scuffling across the floor The boy was at the side of her bed, slipping in under the quilt beside her It was like having a wooden box in the bed, she thought The buttons on his underwear were hard against her arm and his knees and elbows filled the bed He was all bones and buttons He had not slept at her side since she had weaned him She felt with her hand until she found his hard young knuckles She drowsed Towards morning she wakened and found that he had slipped away

In the afternoon Willy Jacklin was buried on the west side of the river and Lantry was buried on the east Several Lantry and Jacklin infants lay under the blackjack oaks of Martha's clearing and her husband Sylvester had given a grudging permission that for Piety's sake the old man should rest there too The preacher and most of the family buried Willy Even Abner Lantry had chosen to follow him Only Piety and Lant, Martha and her chil-

dren, and Zeke and Thad saw the sand fall on Lantry's home made pine coffin Martha was big with child and left the burying nervously as soon as it was ended There was no ceremony Piety thought bitterly that her father had come without the word of his fellows into an alien country and was gone the same way Zeke walked with her and Lant down the road as far as his place.

"Sis," he asked, 'you got money sufficient to do with?'

"I got money to do with for a whiles Willy were rale good that a way He give me his loggin' wages, what didn't go for rations, and I got some hid out I'm gittin' corn and sweet pertaters in the ground soon's I kin I aim to fatten hogs, come fall"

"You always was a great un for corn and 'taters and hogs If I remembers, you always had your hogs so rotten spoiled to where they'd lay up near the house all day, scairt to go to rootin' off a ways for fear they wouldn't hear a year o' corn to drap"

She smiled a little 'Well, Zeke, I makes mighty fine hogs when the 'gators'll leave 'em be"

Zeke said to Lant, "You been wild as a jay-bird, son, runnin' the woods You belong to he'p your mammy now"

They went on The boy's long arms dangled at his sides. His big head, poked forward on his neck, moved from side to side, like a turtle's He frowned, his eyebrows meeting over the red brown eyes

'Ma," he burst out, "I been studyin' Grandpa wa'n't no farmer Nor he wa'n't no trapper nor no timberman What did he do for a livin' in the up-country where he come from?"

"He never did love to say, but he told me oncet 'twere makin' moonshine whiskey"

The boy nodded

"The revenooers gits after them fellers up in Caroliny,"

he said wisely "Grandpa done tol' me they was raisin' sand all the time."

His eyes turned to her and held, steady as a good bead on a target

What were he skeert of, here in Florida?"

She hesitated

'I don't rightly know," she faltered

'You do too," he said 'You do too know."

'I reckon he'd had trouble"

"What kind o' trouble?"

'If you got to know, she said desperately, "he killed him a feller and had to take out"

'Who was after him for killin' the feller?"

'I reckon the gov'mint," she said 'Hit were a gov'mint feller"

"Didn't nobody never come up with him, did they?'

"Nobody never come up with him here. He had it always to figger on"

The boy nodded.

'That's what he was skeert of"

He spat zestfully into the gallberry bushes by the road

'I'll jest bet he had good reason, killin' that feller Nobody better never come messin' up with me, neither,' he said

His maturity startled her

'No, nor you'd better not go to gittin' biggety nor lookin' for a fuss Your Grandpa picked nary fuss in his life."

[illegible]

He swung a moment on the gate before galloping after her up the lane to the house

'Ma,' he coaxed her, 'say now I ain't got to go to school no more, come fall"

"You got to learn somethin'," she protested.

to his timbering and Zeke before he went to his still Since the occasion was somehow extraordinary, Lant rowed across the river and brought back Abner. Abner was florid and pompous He had cattle ranging on both sides of the river

He said at once to his brothers, 'You fellers buried the ol' man too shallow Hit don't do to dig a grave too shallow"

Zeke said mildly, "We ain't had much practice, Ab"

They were digging a new grave for luck, throwing the red gold sand against the sun Thaddeus rested on his shovel

"I don't know as a six foot grave be needful," he said "Four foot had orter do for ary man"

"Not for me, 'twouldn't," Abner said "I aim to swell up when I die"

Zeke and Thad were doing the work Abner strolled off to poke the body of the dead hound with his foot

"On my side the river," he remarked, "some o' the folks was so foolishly fond o' Pa they'd say this were a case o' dog-eat-dog"

They guffawed

Zeke said, "Pa were all right"

Piety sat near by with her hand over her mouth The boy watched with his hands in his overall pockets, scuffling the sand with his bare toes

Abner said, 'Why'n't you bury your dog?'

"He weren t mine He were Grandpa's I got nothin' to do with him Let the buzzards have him"

'Th'ow him out a ways then"

Lantry's board coffin was moved and the new grave filled in Abner turned to the boy

"You want you a rale good dog, son?"

"I wouldn't keer"

The man pondered He never gave something for nothing

"I tell you, son I got nobody to look after my cattle this side the river I got a pair o' young dogs has got no names, even You come git them dogs and learn 'em to run cattle and you he p round up and brand and butcher, and you're welcome to the dogs and a calf for your own"

Lant's face was eager His eyes shone, as though sunlight moved swiftly across pools of cypress water He had never had a dog of his own

He said, "I'll come with you and git 'em"

His uncles laughed at his eagerness

"You'd git there quicker to swim the river, Lant," Thaddeus said

Piety watched him follow after Abner She went back alone to the cabin When dusk came, and the boy had not returned, and the hoot-owls cried, she hated the sound. She got out her accordion and played a hymn on it Her throat swelled and she thought she might feel better if she played something lively She began to play "Double Eagle" but she remembered Lantry playing it on the banjo with his head thrown back and she was obliged to put away the accordion She sat with her hands folded in her lap, rocking in the buckskin rocker, lipping a little snuff She thought of walking down the road to Martha

"'Twon't be the last time I ll set alone,' she decided, and did not go She had no existence, she thought, outside these two males, the one living and the other dead

The boy returned after dark She heard him talking softly to the new dogs He was bedding them under the kitchen, tying them so they could not run away She heard him go into the kitchen and get cornbread to feed them She heard them lapping water She strained her ears for the words he was saying to them The boy came

in the house and she laid out a cold supper for him She stuffed crumbs of biscuit in her mouth, watching his face

"Them s fine leetle fellers,' he said 'One's black as a nigger and one's kind o' red like" He stirred sugar in his cold coffee

'I ve done named 'em Red and Black, Ma"

She was grateful to him for telling her what he had named the puppies

'Them's fine names for dogs o' sich colors," she said with enthusiasm "You couldn't git you no better names for a pair o' dogs"

X

THE new puppies, Red and Black, barked with proper ferocity, rearing against the slat fence The horse hooves coming south down the scrub road sounded nearer Piety was in the back yard at the wash tubs and Lant went to the front stoop to watch A grey horse, ridden by a stranger, drew up at the gate at the foot of the lane Lant could make out the girl Kezzy sitting the horse primly behind the rider She slipped down and opened the gate and the stranger dismounted and followed her.

'Hey, Lant!" she called

'Hey"

The horseman spoke cordially.

'Howdy, son"

'Howdy"

The boy was braced, as though on a slippery bank.

'Where's Aunt Py tee? the girl asked

'Back at the pot"

'The man here's lookin' for Zeke," she said, lifting her heavy eyebrows at him as she passed

The boy's blood pounded in his throat The stranger must be a revenuer, or, sent by the government, had tracked his grandfather down at last He thought with relief that they were three months too late for Lantry Then panic swept across him again The man, of course, was after Zeke.

"What's your name, son?"

"Lantry Jacklin"

"You any kin to Zeke Lantry?"

"He's my uncle"

"Well, now," the stranger said, leaning forward, "you're just the fellow I want to see Your uncle Zeke's at his still, isn't he?'

The boy did not answer The man studied him It irked him to have Zeke's family evade him Zeke s step-daughter, alone at the house, had claimed no knowledge of his whereabouts Zeke had already made excuses to keep him away from the still When Pryde bought whiskey of a moonshiner, he liked to know where to find him

'Come on, sonny Tell me where your Uncle Zeke is right now Just point which way"

The boy felt the coercion and threw his weight against it, like a young bull calf against the tug of the halter His eyes glared but he did not move or speak

'I ll just bet you don't even know"

There was no trap quick enough for the boy's instinct He turned quietly into the house He returned behind Kezzy and his mother Pryde had seated himself on the stoop

'How-do, Ma'am My name's Pryde"

He asked his questions

Piety said, "No, I got no idee where Zeke mought be"

'I'm the man buying that cane syrup of his," he said "That syrup that makes a man feel so prime" He winked at her

She said politely, 'That so?"

A silence fell, in which the squirrels could be heard barking in the neighbouring hammock

At last Pryde said, 'Well, I'm mighty sorry to miss him I had business with him"

Piety and Kezzy looked quickly at each other It would be a pity to lose trade for Zeke The stranger seemed all right. Piety believed him to be the man of whom Zeke had spoken. Pryde was the name, all right She wanted

to tell him to go down the road to Magnolia Landing and to halloo across the river to Zeke, who would answer him from Taylor's Dread She was unable to do so Caution dammed the words in her throat

At last she said questioningly, "If you was to care to state your business now? If you was to say what all you wants o' Zeke, mought be I could find him and tell him"

It was the best Pryde could do

He said bluntly, 'Yes, I ll state my business Tell Zeke to put a barrel of whiskey on the *Mary* when she comes down Wednesday Here's some tags to use See, Florida Cane Syrup, addressed to the Southern Wholesale Grocery Company at Jacksonville Tell him to put one on the barrel and to sent a barrel every Wednesday until I tell him different"

The woman and the girl and boy blinked at him The stranger turned away

Piety said, speaking mildly after the vanishing back, "Mought be a good idee to smear a leetle rale syrup around the edge o' the barrel head, like the juice were leakin' a mite"

Pryde said over his shoulder, 'I don't care what he does to the barrel head, as long as the barrel gets on the boat"

He mounted his horse and thumped off Piety turned the tags over in her hand

She said, "Reckon we better go tell Zeke. Mought make a difference, settin' up more mash, mebbe I ll git me a hat"

She lifted the wide hat of woven palmetto strands over her head with a stiff gesture, bringing it down to sit high on her small head. The three walked across the clearing and down the hammock ledge to the open river landing Piety took up the oars

"I ll row down stream," she said, "and you young uns kin spell me off rowin' back."

The rowboat moved rapidly The river seemed to stand still while the banks slipped past Here and there the tangled lushness bared to dry hammock with saw pal mettos visible, and yellow sand Sometimes there was a break both in swamp and hammock, and broom sage and brier berries grew to the edge of the water No one could have found the entrance to Taylor s Dread who did not know the landmarks Hoop skirt, the big cypress, on one side and on the other a dead grey magnolia The river here had the trick of sending a dribbling thread of current through a slice of mainland making in effect an island Yet between island and mainland the dividing creek was so tortuous and so shallow, that a stranger would have called the island swamp Part way in, the channel merged hopelessly with swamp

I ain t been here in a good whiles Piety said I cain t foller these creeks

The girl said I cain t foller em

The boy pointed to an eddy under an overhanging swamp laurel

Yonder tis

That s it Kezzy agreed Last time we come Zeke cut a limb there to string fish

Piety swung with relief through the dimly marked opening Black rattan twisted about ash trees, scraped the boatsides as they slid through At times it seemed as though they must be again mistaken in the channel for there would come an obstruction But a submerged log that looked solid would yield to the pole a tangle of wild rose briers would open at the last instant so that lowering their bodies flat to the boat, they could pass through A quarter of a mile in there came to their noses the sour sweetness of fermenting mash They were opposite the still Piety spoke in a low voice, questioningly

"Zeke?"

The answer, as low, came startlingly at their elbows They had been seen and heard Zeke squatted behind a clump of palmettos

"Py tee?"

The woman turned the bow of the boat between cypress knees Kezzy and the boy climbed out, drawing the boat high Piety followed Zeke stood up

"Hi, folkses"

Piety asked, "Where's Lulu?"

He jerked his head

"Yonder"

He was gathering an armful of ash wood for his fire. They picked their way through the swamp to the still. Lulu was there, tending the pot She spoke curtly to Piety A pile of bricks and two large sheets of copper stood at one side Zeke planned to build a larger outfit now that business was good There was a demand, even at town bars, for good strong corn liquor Piety gave him the message from Pryde She described the visitor Zeke nodded

"That's him, a'right That's Pryde"

Kezzy said anxiously, "I jest didn't know what to do when he come to the house. All I could study on, was, leave Aunt Py tee talk to him"

Zeke said amiably, "You both done jest right. I jest as lief he not come nosin' around here"

The boy was prowling around the wooden barrels of mash He stood on tiptoe and stirred one with the long paddle standing there

"You git out o' there, Lant!" Piety spoke sharply. "You'll spile your Uncle Zeke's buck"

"That un ain't hardly buck yit, Py-tee Hit's slow, like. Hit ain't made a cap yit and hit's 'most due to run."

"Hit's been cold, nights," Lulu said.

"That's about it."

Zeke dipped a gourd in one of the barrels of seething mash

You want some o the beer, Lulu? How bout you, Py tee?

They refused He gave a drink to the boy, his face in eclipse behind the gourd They laughed at him Zeke took the gourd and drank deeply

They got no call to laugh at us son he said to Lant Us knows what s good He wiped the foam from his mouth I declare this be the healthiest stuff to drink How come me to drink it hit s a pure nuisance to tote river water And they s a taste to the creek water I jest someways cain t love I tried the buck one day I were thirsty and felt kind o porely and it done me good

The island was cool and dusky The sunlight lay like lace under the palms and cypresses The black moist earth smelled of leaf mould Wild yellow cannas and blue iris bloomed around the brackish pools The pot boiled, gurgling as it began Its steam passed through a pipe and through copper coils submerged in water The distillate began to drip slowly from a copper spout The Lantrys leaned their backs against tree trunks and fell idle and silent The boy climbed a tall sweet gum and gathered a handful of the balls to play with He settled himself in a high crotch where he could glimpse the river on one side, and on the other his uncle Abner s cattle coming through the swamp to drink

There was suddenly a commotion at the edge of the creek Lant cried from his tree-crotch Hogses! and half a dozen black shoats splashed through the swamp throwing the muck and rattling palmetto fronds. They collided violently with one another as they discovered the group of humans and fell in a heap They were drunk The boy laughed shrilly from the sweet gum throwing his prickly balls Zeke shouted and lunged at them They staggered

to their feet and ran sideways, their ears flopping over hazed eyes He drove them back across the shallow water of the creek They ran grunting to the piney woods beyond Piety and Kezzy and the boy laughed, but Zeke was angry

"Dog take them shoatses o' Posey's ' He was out of breath 'They comes ever' day a fillin' their bellies with my th'owed-out mash and gittin' hog-drunk to go back home again Ary fool could back-track 'em here to the still I got a good idee to move my outfit"

"You feerd Posey ll call in the revenooers?" Piety asked

"Hell, no Ain t no revenooers in these parts, Sis I m skeert Posey'll come steal my whiskey"

Piety chuckled and rose from the ground to go The boy clambered down from the tree He ran ahead to climb in the boat and picked up the oars It would be a long row against the current He settled down in his usual silence, his eyes alert. On the way he might see many things, a buck crossing the river, an otter's smooth flat nose lifted above the sinuous streak that was the swimming body, always alligators and Poor Joes, and perhaps a water turkey that at sight of them would drop from its limb as if shot, straight into the depths of the river

Kezzy said, "Leave me take a oar, Lant"

"I don't want no big ol girl rowin' side o' me," he said

On Wednesday Lant heard the *Mary* whistle as she passed north and approached Two-Mile Landing above Taylor s Dread Zeke was there, he thought, loading his barrel of whiskey with its syrup label

'Sho," he thought, 'I could tell the difference if I was a revenooer Whiskey makes a thin sound moving Syrup's slow and thick"

The barrel was not questioned, he decided, for three Wednesdays in succession he heard the *Mary* whistle and

no news came of trouble On a Monday the *Mary* went south up the river as usual Soon after the last echo of the engines had been absorbed by the bends in the stream, Lant heard hoof beats coming up the scrub road He recognised Zeke, riding a bay mule, and ran to the gate to meet him Zeke was small and frightened on the big animal His pale blue eyes bulged and his mouth was tremulous

'Hit happened," he said 'You tell Py tee hit happened I knowed it were a risk The last barrel busted its hoops on the wharf at Jacksonville Cap n Turner's nigger boy th'owed me off a note in a bottle Cap'n done the best he could for me He had to tell where the barrel was loaded, but he let on like he didn t know my name I aim to stay hid out til I see what comes of it'

"Where you goin'? the boy asked eagerly

"Son, I ain't tellin' nobody but my wife Lulu and her Kezzy—and you all I ain t even tellin' Martha and Syl, nor Thad You tell your Ma I ll be at old man Paine's, and time she figgers they's no more risk, you come git me word"

He lifted his reins and the mule jerked forward

'I'm jest dependin' on you, son," he called gravely over his shoulder

The bay mule jogged off The boy bolted up the lane and into the house to his mother He repeated breathlessly his uncle's message

'I mean, ol' Uncle Zeke is scairt," he said

"He's got reason," she said thoughtfully "But I some ways don't figger no revenooers'll never git fur into the Dread"

"They's nary man 'tother side o' the river would tell 'em the way to go? None o' Pa's kin what's mad at us?"

She shrilled indignantly at him

"You got you no sense? Don't never leave me hear you

say sich as that again They's nary Wilson nor Jacklin that low-down and sorry, to turn a man up"

"Some of 'em's right low-down," he *insisted, grinning*

That night he could scarcely sleep for excitement. Every sound in the night struck quickly, like a blow Leaves fell from the live-oak on the shingles like fingers being laid on a latch When Red and Black, chained under the house, changed position in the sand, it was as though strange men walked in the yard He was out of bed as soon as his mother in the morning, hurrying her at the stove He ate his breakfast in a deep absorption He did his chores in a careless hurry The woman heard him running down the road toward Zeke's clearing

Lant slipped up to Zeke's back door He wanted to see Kezzy Her mother sometimes sent him curtly away This time the girl herself came to the door, her square hands dripping with soap suds

'Hey, Kezzy," he whispered "Where's your Ma?'

She laughed

"She takened to the bed when the word come She's worse scairt than Zeke I ain't scairt I jest got a feelin' nothin' won't come of it '

He stepped into the doorway beside her For all his gangling length at ten, the girl at twelve was still a head taller He stood on tiptoe to whisper in her ear

'Did ol' Zeke leave ary whiskey to the outfit?"

"Three jugs, Ma said"

He frowned importantly

'Kezzy, Uncle Zeke done tol' me to look out for things. He said he were dependin' on me How 'bout me and you goin' in the boat and gittin' out that whiskey, if them gov'mint cat birds goin' to come?"

She looked at him a moment She took off her gingham apron, tossed it into the kichen behind her and went with him without speaking Her dark eyes shone. They walked

flat footed and silent until they were out of Lulu's hearing, then scurried for the road They ran most of the half mile

Piety saw the pair cutting across the far corner of the Lantry clearing It was not like Kezzy to come so close and not say "Howdy" The woman went to the fence and called to them They stopped in their tracks She could see them questioning each other Finally they walked slowly towards her Kezzy looked sheepish The boy faced his mother boldly

She scolded, "You jest better come when I call I want to know what all you young uns are up to"

Kezzy did not speak

"We're goin'," the boy said, "no matter what you say. We're goin' to git out Uncle Zeke's jugs o' whiskey"

The woman was silent

"You study about it right on," he said belligerently

"The way I'm studyin'," she said, 'hit's the thing to do. I been thinkin', mought be he had axes and sich could be proved was his"

"You got good sense sometimes, Ma," he said approvingly

The woman and girl laughed together at him

'I'll go along," Piety said "You young uns cain't lift them jugs"

The rowboat was at the open landing Paddling with the swift current, the boy reached the entrance to the Dread in a few minutes It was hard poling through the creek channel and he could only go slowly His high thin cheekbones were wet with sweat All three felt hurried They plunged across the swamp to the abandoned still It stood bleak and cold The mash had been ready to run the day before and was now flat Zeke's axe lay in plain sight with his initials burned in the handle Kezzy ran with it to the

boat The woman made three trips with the five gallon demi johns of liquor They were heavy for her and at the creek edge she dropped the third jug It struck a stump as it slipped and the crash reverberated back and forth across the Dread It frightened them They shivered in the dark swamp

"Git the boat goin'," the woman said nervously "We're fixin' to git caught ourselves"

Out of the swamp and on the open river, Lant allowed Kezzy to take one of the oars Piety sat in the stern seat, her long full skirt spread out around her, covering the two jugs underneath The boy took his thoughts from the swamp and river to watch his mother's small face, drawn with her fear Half way home, the chugging of a motor sounded down the current A small launch swung suddenly around a bend and passed close to them

Two strangers on board eyed them casually, nodded to the woman, the girl and the boy, and were gone, leaving a wake that rocked the light rowboat The boy and girl continued to row, not daring to look at each other The woman's thin lips were dry They heard the launch stop at Two-Mile Landing The boy thought his heart would burst against his ribs Safe at the river-bank at the Lantry landing, he spoke

"Reckon we kin tote them jugs up the ledge?"

The woman shook her head

"Hide 'em under the palmetters and lay moss and trash on top"

They walked in single file up through the hammock

Kezzy said, "I best be gittin' on back to Ma She'll be rarin'" She was subdued, but her mouth twitched as she left them "You Mister Lant, you," she said drily, "next time you git a idee you jest keep it"

Piety sat down weakly in the breezeway The boy sat

beside her, kicking his heels against the steps He had set out proud and bold Now he felt limp and half sick Piety dipped herself a drink of water.

"A ruckus like this takes the starch outen you," she said

"Ma," he asked, "what happens if them gov'mint buzzards cold-out ketches a feller?"

She blinked her turtle lidded eyes and shook her head

"Jest ain't no tellin'"

They passed a week of torment Kezzy did not come to the house They were trying to make up their minds to walk down to see her, braving Lulu, when Cleve Jacklin, who had been visiting his Uncle Abner across the river, brought Piety a note from him Phrased discreetly, it passed the word that the revenue agents had come and gone They had questioned half the men at Eureka No one had heard of any moonshining on the river The revenuers had tried to find the outfit, working back from Two-Mile Landing, but the swamp had been too much for them It was safe for Zeke to come home again Piety might know her brother's whereabouts, Abner did not Cleve stood gossiping with his aunt The boy Lant slipped away

When Cleve had gone, Piety found Lant saddling the mule Red and Black leaped about its heels

"I kin go tell Zeke, cain't I?"

"Go ahead Kin you make Pat's Island by night fall?"

"Yessum"

"You want to carry cold rations?"

"Better wrop up some biscuits"

"What about your dogs? They're rarin' to go, but it's mighty fur for the leetle fellers"

"Call 'em back, time I'm down the lane"

He was gone, thin and bony on top of the mule, his elbows at angles

As he rode the long miles to old man Paine's, the sand

road shadowy under canopied pines, a load lifted from him The river was safe, after all, intruders came, but they went away, and swamp and hammock and scrub were safer When he reached the tall yellow pines that lifted Pat's Island high above the dry scrub country, and found Zeke and old man Paine smoking and chatting on the stoop, when they hailed him like a grown man; when he spent the night in a strange bed, with the smell of strange walls and bedding about him, and when the old hunter said at daylight, "Boy, you spend a week two with me Your mammy won't keer", he forgot his fears It was as though he had been away in a chill far land and had come safe home again to the good scrub

Zeke rode away to join the timber crew He was through with 'shining The old man and the boy watched after him

Paine said, 'Zeke say you want to quit school and he'p make a livin' for your mammy I got a bait o' trapses you kin borry You kin trap all winter You got a fine place for trappin' You kin learn to shoot good and sell venison to them river boats Son, I ll learn you tricks about huntin' and trappin' will open your eyes like a nine-day puppy. I know the tricks"

He pulled his stringy whiskers and winked

"A young 'coon for runnin'—but a ol' 'coon for cunnin'."

XI

Old man Paine, sitting on the Lantry stoop with Piety and Lant, waved his catfish whiskers over his chew of tobacco

"Sun's jest fixin' to set over Simms' ledge," he said

Lant said, "Moon rise 'bout a hour after sun tonight"

The old man nodded

"Finest kind o' time for the deer"

"Moon-down's jest as good," Lant said

Paine gave him a push with his foot

"You leetle ol' shirt tail boy, you, settin' there tellin' me the time to hunt How old you now, anyway?"

"He's fourteen," Piety answered defiantly "You'd think he were a growed man I declare I never knowed a young un so biggety"

The old hunter swerved to the boy's defense They had become cronies, as close as the distance between them allowed They visited back and forth several times a year Paine had passed on to the boy his lore of scrub and hammock Much was only corroboration of what Lant had guessed

"Why, the boy's right," he said "He knows the deer feeds on the moon, like most ary wild creeter Four times the deer feeds Stirs or feeds Moon rise and moon-down, and south moon-over and south moon under Come moon rise, say, the deer's done been sleepin', ain't they? They comes out about a hour 'fore the moon They feeds a while and frolics a while"

"And blows," Lant interrupted.

"And blows Or sets lullin' around Or walks around nibblin' They *fools around a good whiles.*" *He spat from* the stoop "Hit's jest my idee," he added, "favourin' moonrise Seem to me the deer's hongrier and more keerless Jest like I enjoys my breakfast afore sun up the most of ary meal"

"The best time for deer," Lant said, 'is after two-three days' rain"

"You mighty right"

"Why's that?" Piety asked

"Why, the deer won't sleep in the rain Time the rain stops, they beds down to sleep and you kin walk right up on 'em Many's the time I could of drug off a deer by the scut, he'd be sleepin' that sound"

"I never knowed that," Piety said

"Reckon not" Paine winked at Lant "You ain't never lived here in the scrub, Miss Py-tee. You jest done been here."

They laughed The old man clasped his hands behind his head.

"What I love the most," he said, "is fire-huntin'. Slippin' along in the dark, with my ol' fire-pan at the end of a pole over my shoulder, and the fat wood splinters blazin' away —and then the light shinin' sudden in the ol' buck's eyes——"

The boy hunched closer, breathless.

"—and me balancin' the fire pole under my right arm and h'istin' my rifle and takin' aim betwixt them two shinin' eyes——"

The boy rubbed his bony knees. The old man spat indifferently.

"——jest a pity," he finished, "the moon'll be too bright to fire hunt tonight"

The boy's face fell He gathered his lanky legs into his long arms, twitching in his eagerness

"Le's go jest at moon rise, then," he pled earnestly, "and kill us a deer in the Shanghai"

The old man, tormenting him, seemed to ruminate He said at last, 'Iffen you'll guarantee to kill him'

'I'll kill him"

'Mind you do now You got it to do, now you got your promise out"

The boy ran for his gun and shells He shot a 12 gauge double barrelled hammer gun It was a heavy Belgian piece that must be cocked separately for the two barrels, but he handled it well He was a better shot than any of his uncles The dogs Red and Black sensed his excitement and jumped about him He pulled their ears Red growled when the old man laid a hand on him Piety apologised for the dog

'Black's right friendly," she said, "but Red won't even let me tech him That Red's a wild un Cain't nobody but Lant much him '

They ate supper of cornbread, cold baked sweet potatoes, white bacon and coffee Piety had an iron cook stove, but she still used over its open flame the Dutch ovens and kettles in which she and her mother had long done their cooking on the hearth She offered white sugar and a bottle of Abner's cane syrup to Paine

'Will you have long or short sweetenin'?' she inquired politely

'I'll take the long, Ma'am," he said, pouring syrup in his coffee cup "What a man's raised on, seem to taste better right on"

Piety said, "Don't ask Lant here which un he want—jest give him one whopped on top of 'tother"

The sun had set The kitchen in which they ate grew black The stove and table and kitchen safe loomed monstrous The faces were large and white The boy

seemed to have only cheeks and eyes, for his hair was one with the ruddy dusk He and Paine rose to go He chained the dogs so they could not follow Piety watched after them a moment She would have liked to go with them through the soft night. She turned into the house Before the man and boy reached the sweet potato field they heard the plaintive wheeze of her accordion making its faltering music.

Paine led the way The boy felt proudly that he was following a master The old man had killed many hundreds of deer in his day, trailing and stalking, fire hunting by night, tiling' a gun on a trail that led to a water hole, gauging the proper height by the size of the tracks, so [illegible]

[illegible]

Crossing the scrub road that skirted an abandoned field, Paine nudged the boy and pointed in the twilight to deer tracks. A large buck had fed twelve hours ago and had come out this way

Hes likely layin up right around here some eres," Paine whispered

They advanced slowly The old man was sure footed, putting his toe first to earth, so that if he stepped on a branch or twig that gave signs of crackling, he was ready poised to withdraw his foot The boy was inherently awkward His body moved in spasms under his impassioned control Once, laying down his foot on a dry palmetto frond, he threw out his long arms to balance himself against the halted step He struck the boughs of a live-oak They made the sound of a squirrel jumping Lant held his breath until the blood pounded against his ears. There was no answering leap of startled game. He

let out his breath in a puff and moved forward again A prickly pear jabbed its barbs through his overalls He made no sound

The scrub lay behind them The buck would come from the scrub tonight The moon rose as they reached the potato field Lant pointed to the vines, trampled and eaten The man and boy moved an inch at a time The buck had not come in

Paine looked about him appraisingly In the centre of the field stood a tall slash pine The lowest branches were twelve feet from the ground The boy had built a scaffold among them Paine spoke aloud, but lightly His voice was no more than the stir of one pine bough rubbing against another

We ll climb the tree, son, and wait for the scoundrel up in your Shanghai'

He hunched up the rough tree trunk, agile as an old 'possum The boy on tiptoe reached the guns up to him and hunched after him They sat in the Shanghai their legs dangling The moon swung up over the scrub The hammock was black velvet, but the field at their feet was silver The sweet potato vines were silver grey There was no wind Suddenly the hammock around the field seemed to be falling down There was a crashing in the underbrush then a thud thud where the buck had leaped the fence He was among the potato vines

For a few moments he made no sound He may have scented them faintly for he indulged in a deer s mysterious trick of standing still and striking his hooves to make a deceptive sound of running Then there came, when he was satisfied as to his surroundings, a soft rustling The boy could not credit his senses The buck was here, almost under his feet, and he could not see him He had heard of the things moonlight did to the bodies, but he could

not have believed that a deer within twenty feet of him could elude his eyes Paine eased his gun higher

The rustling moved farther away There was a break in the hammock to the north, where the field joined the rest of the Lantry clearing The boy saw a black outline of antlers lifted an instant against the bright night He fired blindly A snort sounded by the fence, there was again the thud of the fence leap, the buck s heels pounded three or four times and he was gone Paine spoke in his normal voice

'We jest as good to go home, son You won't see no more deer tonight

Lant was sick with his chagrin

'Dog take it, I seed his ol horns agin the fence top'

'Yes, and you fired too quick and too high ' Paine spoke mildly I seed him when you shot, and your fire plumb cleared his head You got that to learn, shootin' up above this-a way You got to figger the same way shootin' on top of a rise towards a valley You been used to shootin' on a level Hit's the most natchel thing in the world, *over shootin' Ne' mind, son, you ll git the hang of it* ' He chuckled I mean, the buck crashed thu like a lumber-cart"

Lant considered himself a good shot It made him ugly to find there was still much he did not know He did not want to go home with Paine. He lagged behind

Paine said, This time o' yare, a buck's a right dark grey color You'd of done better to of waited You'd of got used to him stirrin' in the moonlight, and first thing, you'd of seed him clare"

The boy stopped short His heart beat violently If that were true, he could see the deer playing tonight in Twin Sinks He had only been able to account for the multitude of tracks there by deciding that the deer came in to frolic.

He had intended to take old man Paine with him the next time he went, but he was ashamed and wanted now to go alone

He said, "You go on, Uncle Frank I aim to lay for a rabbit 'fore I comes in"

Paine thought he hoped to get another shot at a deer He smiled to himself, nodded and went to the cabin The boy watched him disappear and turned into the mottled half light of the hammock

A bright night made little change in the hammock Where the sunlight was tawny, the moonlight was silver-grey Sunlight or moonlight or the incandescence of sub tropical stars no more than washed thinly through the live oaks and magnolias A pillared canopy kept the earth black and moist and cool The boy smelled the spice of crushed fern as he walked Over its aroma lay the lighter odour of palmetto bloom He divided them in his nostrils, the one from the other The trail sometimes turned up the sloping bluff, sometimes dipped without reason close to the swamp The cypress men had perhaps made it so, deviating this way or that to avoid a fallen tree It was familiar by reason of a certain hickory here, a clump of ash there, or a mere conjunction of tree and shrub and slope, the sum making something recognisable, as an assortment of features makes a face

Lant kept the lower trail along the swamp until he was directly below the Twin Sinks Then he turned sharply and climbed the steep bluff The trees grew larger, the hammock more open, as he reached the top The deer might have come already, he approached the sink holes cautiously There was no evidence a short distance away of the great cavities They yawned suddenly at his feet Limestone underlay the section, honeycombed by subterranean springs and rivers Every so often a shell of surface soil, eaten away from underneath, weakened by rain, gave

way What seemed solid earth one day was a gaping hole the next Sometimes spring water filled it for a foot or two in depth, sometimes, as here, the hidden river having dropped insidiously to a lower level, the sink hole was perpetually dry

The deer had not yet come Lant peered over the edge of the Sinks When the earth had caved in here, some forty years before, a firm ledge a few feet wide had remained standing in the middle On either side of the ridge lay a deep bowl, fifty feet deep, the almost perpendicular sides sparsely grown up with tall hickories and magnolias and sweet gums By daylight the boy had seen these walls so spotted with deer tracks that it seemed as if a triangular hoe had worked the soil At the bottom of the east sink were a gopher shell and a rattlesnake skeleton The gopher had fallen in and had never been able to climb the slippery sanded slopes to the top again The rattlesnake, if the stories told were true, had been killed by a deer The skull of the snake was split neatly down the middle

There was no wind If he picked a proper position the deer would not scent him At the brim of the west sink grew a magnolia tree He climbed it, hoping that he would not leave too strong a taint behind him He settled himself well above the lower branches Through the broad varnished leaves the Twin Sinks showed plain The moon, almost full and a quarter high, turned the gopher shell below to ivory With the firm trunk of the magnolia at his back, the boy dozed

He was wakened by the throaty cries of hoot-owls. The birds were sobbing in the trees around him He had not heard them so close before Their voices beat on him like the deep string of the banjo when he tore at it to make a fierce bass music. He heard the sweep of wings across the hammock, striking on the still air The moon rode at its zenith, swimming through high clouds.

'Jest south moon-over," Lant thought 'Feed time for them hootin' scapers"

He could only guess that the deer would come here to play *He could only pray profanely, clenching his square* tanned fists, that the taint of him would not filter down to frighten them away

He breathed deeply 'I hopes I don't stink to where them creeters kin smell me"

He could see nothing The shadow of the magnolia lay on the earth But there was motion He sensed it, rather than heard

"——slippin' in, the way they does,' he thought

Deer could move more silently than any bird Quail could not stir among the brambles without a rustling, nor turtle doves fly from a pine without a whistling of wings, but deer, with hooves sharp enough to crack a snake skull, could move without sound The grey bodies were there in the bright moonlight Perhaps they stood at the edge of the sink hole, heads lifted, nostrils wide, as he had often seen them He scarcely breathed Then he heard a light thumping The familiar snap of the cradled leap sounded below him There was a jostling and a multitudinous *thudding* He *strained his eyes, daring to lean an inch or* two to one side

As though a rifle sight had been brought down accurately on an elusive mark, he saw them An old buck was there, leading the play, with a doe and a yearling The buck ran down the far wall of the east sink hole, then bounded up the near side, stretching his legs in the joy of the climbing The yearling followed Sometimes they ran at once down the side of the same sink; sometimes they kicked up their heels a moment on the dividing ledge and plunged out of sight into the other They raced and crowded one another They blew and snorted Once the doe stood at the bottom with wary lifted head while the

buck and yearling frolicked They were more like moonlit shadows than blood filled animals The boy could no more than discern them, nebulous as the ghosts of deer

He longed for his shotgun He had left it in a clump of palmettos He wanted to kill Yet the deer stirred him If he had had his gun, he decided he would not have shot They were strangely dear to him They were a part of him, closer than his mother or his dogs or his bed

The yearling butted at the doe Lant drew in his breath and let it out again with the sharp Hah! he used in swinging an axe The sound struck ominously on the hushed night The deer threw up their heads in a moment of alarm and were gone in three directions as noiselessly as they had come Far off he heard the buck blow, calling to the others He heard them answer

Lant slid down the magnolia trunk He retraced his steps, the light so bright about him that he could see the shine of new green sparkleberries His gun barrel glinted under the palmettos He swung the gun over his shoulder and trudged home It was not far from daylight

On the way home he considered the deer and the moon He considered the fish and the owls The deer and the rabbits, the fish and the owls, stirred at moon rise and at moon-down, at south moon-over and at south moon under The moon swung around the earth or the earth swung around the moon, he was not sure The moon rose in the east and that was moon rise Six hours later it hung at its zenith between east and west, and that was south moon over It set in the west and that was moon-down Then it passed from sight and swung under the earth, between west and east *And when it was directly under the earth,* that was south moon under

He could understand that the creatures, the fish and the owls, should feed and frolic at moon rise, at moon-down and at south moon-over, for these were all plain marks to

go by, direct and visible He marvelled, padding on bare feet past the slat fence of the clearing, that the moon was so strong that when it lay the other side of the earth, the creatures felt it and stirred by the hour it struck The moon was far away, unseen, and it had power to move them.

XII

The winter in which Lant turned sixteen was an unhealthy one The weather had been unseasonable since October, when the autumn storms failed to appear The dry heat of summer had continued on past Christmas The mosquitoes thrived through January and February, with no rain, no cold, to kill them It was impossible to raise anything in the garden

Early in March the influenza struck along the river There were a dozen deaths on the piney woods side Then it crossed the river into the scrub On the morning of the fifteenth Sylvester Jacklin rode to the gate, hitched his horse and walked up the lane. Lant and Piety me him at the front stoop They went into the front room and sat by the hearth fire Sylvester was ill at ease He sat on the edge of a hickory chair, twisting his wide-brimmed black felt hat in his hands He had not been in the house since the day he had taken away the body of Willy Jacklin Piety was glad to be friendly with her sister s husband

'How come you not workin' today, Syl?' she asked

'The Comp'ny knocked off the last crew a week ago,' he said "Them scapers got enough cypress stacked in the yards at Palatka to do 'em 'til my young uns is growed'

He twirled his hat on one finger and did not lift his eyes

'I wouldn't be to work no-ways this evenin'," he said He blurted out, "Py-tee, no man on earth hated to ask a favour worser'n me. But I got to ask you to come nuss Marthy Her and two o' the leetle gals has got the flu."

"I tol' you that were Doc Lorimer's mare," Lant nodded at Piety

"I thought 'twere Zeke's Lulu had takened it," the woman said "Kezzy were here Monday and said her Ma were down"

'Marthy takened it from her, I reckon," he said heavily "Doc says they're all in a mighty bad fix Thad's down, too" He looked at her helplessly "'Tain't nobody but you to go to That passel o' young uns o' mine, squallin' and dirty and hongry—" He wiped his forehead

She rose quickly

'You kin make out cookin', cain't you, Lant?"

'Shore kin Mebbe I'll git me enough bacon for oncet"

Sylvester stood up, relieved

'Come eat with us, Lant," he said, 'if you git lonesome or hongry 'fore your Ma gits back"

'Don't you worry bout him," Piety called from her bedroom 'He ll go down to Zeke's and set on the back stoop and Kezzy ll sneak him out a hull half a lard cake'

'Uh huh!' the man laughed 'That's likely where my Cleve goes when he comes home with his belly done a'ready full"

Kezzy spoils all two of 'em And Lulu wonderin' where the flour and sugar goes to"

She came out with a change of clothing in a clean flour sack and fumbled on the mantel for her snuff-box

"I'm gone," she said to Lant 'Don't you starve my cats nor my chickens"

He watched after her down the lane, crooking his neck, as long as a water turkey's He had grown like jimson weed in the past year He was stretched out almost to his full raw-boned length His body was a jointed pole for the support of his big red haired head He called Red and Black from under the house, laid them on their sides in the

sun and picked off their fleas The dogs groaned with pleasure.

Red was Lant's favorite. He was a strange dog His nature was for night hunting He had lain in the yard all day, napping, opening one eye, friendly enough, at the cats and chickens The youngest kitten had played around him, had chased small grey lizards across his paws, had slept with him in the afternoon sunlight, warming its back against him Now the dog seemed to watch the progress of the sun across the sky

Lant ate a cold supper and fed the dogs Black lay down again Red yawned, shook himself, stretched When the sun dropped behind the ledge, he walked stiff legged to the slat fence, wormed himself through a gap and began his rounds He followed the first track he picked up Usually a 'possum, a 'coon a wild cat or a skunk had passed close to the fence since daylight Tonight when he put his nose to the tainted earth, the prey proved to be one of Piety's kittens It leaped ahead of him and made a persimmon tree in the clearing The bark slipped Red was on it He gave one prodigious shake of his head He strode off, superbly indifferent that the same dead kitten had lain in the sun that day against his ruddy belly Lant followed him and buried the kitten under the persimmon Red, on his way to the hammock, rolled his eye at him

"You better be proud Ma never seed you ketch that un," Lant called after him

He spent the evening oiling his traps to put them away for the spring and summer The trapping season was ended He had done well, especially with 'coon hides. He had made enough to live on, with a few dollars left over; for three years there had been no more talk of school He was almost a man, he thought, and the danger from that source was over.

In the morning he rolled up his last bundle of hides to take to Eureka for the itinerant fur buyer He re strung his grandfather's banjo and tuned it to a pitch that suited him Towards noon he went to the kitchen and looked from the cold range to the cupboard and back again He went whistling down the road to Kezzy

She came to the back door with red rims around her eyes

'Lant," she said, 'I m feered ain't none of 'em goin' to make it"

He had not been concerned with his ailing kin Because Kezzy was distressed, he became leaden He was not even hungry any more

'Ary thing I kin do?' he asked

She shook her dark head At eighteen, she had unplaited the smooth braids and coiled them loosely at the nape of her white neck He missed seeing them shake when she moved her head

'Jest come down ever' day to see," she said 'You'll belong to go for he'p if things goes the way I figger they're goin'"

She did not offer him dinner and he went home and cooked an unpalatable corn pone In the late afternoon he took Red and Black and went hunting in the scrub His whole family faded from his mind

In the morning Zeke was again a widower, for Lulu was dead Through the rest of the week the others died who had been stricken, Martha and two small girls, and Thaddeus Lantry Piety thought that it was strange her grief for them should be so thin. Perhaps death could only do great damage once After the pain of Lantry's going, sorrow for these others was a harmless shadow She saw *them buried under the blackjacks, saw the Lantry settlement* dissolve out of the scrub within a few short weeks

She half expected that Zeke or Sylvester Jacklin would

marry Thad's widow, Nellie If Kezzy would stay and keep house for him, Zeke said, he could get along without a wife

'Take a heap more'n you, Zeke, to drive me outen the scrub,' the girl said

Nellie and her children moved back across the river. Sylvester Jacklin moved back too On the first of June he married a woman with children of her own who would have nothing to do with his motherless brood. Nellie took his girls to raise with her own Piety agreed to take Cleve, a lazy fellow of eighteen, until he should find steady work. She came away from the family meeting at Abner Lantry's house in the piney woods to tell Lant, waiting with the rowboat, what she had done He frowned

'We'll be feedin the scaper longer'n you figger on,' he said. "What with Kezzy stayin' on in the scrub, and Cleve hatin' work the way he do, he won't find nothin' to do You watch and see

'You jest don't want nothin around but a mess o' dogs,' she said indignantly "Cleve'll tote my stove wood and he'p in the garden

'Yes," he said, and he'll set on the stoop and swop lies with you like ary woman

They rowed across the river in silence. Half way up the ledge to the clearing, Piety asked

'You reckon Cleve's courtin Kezzy?"

He said, "Cleve's jest natchelly the courtin' kind"

Cleve was to move his clothes over the following week. He would sleep in Lantry's bed in the front room Piety spent a day sorting her bedding to find quilts for him Her eyes burned and her neck ached She emptied a shelf over her trunk to make a place for his belongings The next morning she had a hard chill and could not get up In the afternoon a high fever set in Her back ached as though she would break in two in the bed She had had

malaria before, but it had not struck so viciously as this

"I'll take me a leetle dose o' asafoetidy," she said to Lant "You better take one, too, to clear your blood"

"I won't touch the stinkin' stuff," he said "I been takin' my medicine"

"What you been takin'?"

"I've done carried a piece o' prickly ash in my shoe all spring to chew on"

"Did you make a soap and honey poultice for that risin' on your arm, like I tol you yestiddy?"

"I made better n that I made a prickly pear pad and it's drawin' fine"

"You'll take them wild things," she complained, "and not doctor yourself fitten"

"You're down and I'm up, ain t I?"

The asafoetida, she admitted the next day, had not helped her The rest of the week she took Black Draught and Pierce's Chill Tonic The fever grew worse Lant brought Kezzy to see her

"Ma used to tie nine knots in a string," the girl told her, "and dip it in turpentine and wear it nine days around her waist, to cure the fever"

"I done that the first day I knowed 'twas chills and fever," the woman said "I takened it off and had Lant dip it agin jest today"

"Maybe that's what's the matter," Kezzy said "Ma never takened it off The string keeps its strength a long time When you take it off, it's that strong to where you can tie it around a tree and it'll give the tree chills and fever"

The girl bathed her and put a fresh sheet on the bed and a clean quilt over her She baked cornbread and biscuits and swept the house Lant followed her about

"If 'twas you, would you load Ma in the wagon and carry her to Doc?" he asked

She stood in the bedroom doorway studying the sick woman

'She ain't fitten to carry You go tell Doc what ails her and leave him send her medicine"

Piety roused from her stupor

'Lant needs medicine, too," she said 'He's got a humour in his blood and he'll eetch and eetch until he'll scratch his back agin a post like ary hog'

Kezzy said, "'Pears to me like not havin' no fresh greens in so long is what ailded ever'body"

'Ol' Doctor Kezzy—' he taunted her He reached for her hair "Dog take it, since you put them braids up I cain't git me no handful to pull"

"Mebbe that's why I put 'em outen the way"

He walked with her to the gate

"Cleve's movin' over Monday, ain't he?" she asked. "You and him come down to Zeke and me for your dinners Don't you set up to the table and wait for your Ma to git outen the bed and cook for you I declare, men folks is a sight."

He left her and went to the river to row to Eureka Doc Lorimer prescribed heavy doses of quinine and sent back as well a dose of his special liver-twister

This'll scrape that scrub sand out of her guts," Doc said "Carry her down here when the fever leaves her"

In a week she was free of fever, weak and light headed, but able to go in the rowboat to Lorimer's one-room office in Eureka. Lant joked outside with crazy Ramrod Simpson while she made her call Old Doc wrapped up her medicines.

"How much do I owe you, Doc?"

"Nothin' but sixty cents for the quinine Don't enough stuff go in these here other things to matter My treatments ain't worth a cent when it comes to anybody I've doctored long as I have you I know too much about you

to charge you I know your gizzard forrards and back" He handed her the package 'Take one of them big pills in the morning I m wormin' you for luck"

He walked with her towards the door

'I mistrust the hookworm," he said, "where folks has got no outhouse Modrun science," he said, lifting his snow white eyebrows over his steel rimmed spectacles, "modrun science figgers not havin' no outhouse has got somethin to do with it"

Piety agreed with enthusiasm Old Doc was deaf and she lifted her small voice

"That's what I tells Lant," she said shrilly 'I keep a tellin' him and a tellin' him, but boy like he's heedless I ve purely begged him to build us an outhouse, he's got the lumber, right there on the place he's got the lumber, and he won't go to the bother I tell him I m ashamed when the Wilsons and the Jacklins comes a visitin', but what's shame to him?

She had no strength She was still faint and dizzy Sit ting idly in the breezeway through long afternoons of summer sun, she had a heightened perception of the changes that had swept across the Lantry settlement like a storm She was conscious, as she had not been before, of the thinning out of the scrub of its human inhabitants Her father, she thought, had lived not quite long enough He had died with the noise of timbering in his ears, the sound of boats on the river; in the swamp the voices of men Under the blackjacks he had no ears to prick up in grati tude for the new peace

The fading away of human life was taking place all over the scrub She remembered as a girl a settlement of Eng lish people and Yankees at Riverside The Big Freeze of '95 had sent them scuttling away like rats, abandoning their homes and clearings Stray settlers on the small scrub lakes had lost heart and moved away The lumber company had

taken the river cypress and had gone. Towards Riverside men had boxed the long leaf yellow pine, had sent out rosin and turpentine, leaving the great trees to rot before their time A small mill at Cedar Landing had sawed our most of the swamp cedar Turpentine still and cedar mill now lay abandoned. Men had reached into the scrub and along its boundaries, had snatched what they could get and had gone away, uneasy in that vast indifferent peace; for a man was nothing, crawling ant like among the myrtle bushes under the pines Now they were gone, it was as though they had never been The silence of the scrub was primordial The wood thrush crying across it might have been the first bird in the world—or the last

It seemed to Piety that human habitation kept a house standing Through the summer she saw Thad's and Martha's empty cabins sag a little at the corners, the roofs begin to cave in like battered hats The rain pipes rusted through, so that the cisterns went stagnant, then dry Oak snakes took up residence along the beams The hammock crept in from one side and the scrub from the other Wild grape vines began to lace themselves up the trellises where coral vines had been, and seedling pine trees sprang up between the steps She saw with a strange clarity that it did not matter Even Lantry did not matter, for her son walked long and brown across the clearing The dead were the dead and the living were the living The grow-in [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]

that Lant and Piety sometimes forgot at first that he was there He was inert and pasty, with a round full face. His mother's sandy colouring had come to him still further faded His hair was fine and light like corntassels. He had pale sulky eyes Sometimes he grinned broadly and exposed his gums

He helped Piety with the small chores of the place; talked cosily with her on the stoop, bringing gossip from across the river. Lant was away a great deal, gone like a lean red cat into swamp and hammock and scrub She enjoyed the company of the older youth. She could not understand Lant's vague hostility to his cousin.

"If 'twas a 'coon with one toe gone, I'd takened in," she said to her son, "you'd jest think it was perfeckly fine."

XIII

The scrub lay parching under an August sun. The wire-grass was brown and dry. The scrub pines quivered in the heat, their taproots pushing desperately lower for a water that was not there. The dessicated needles gave forth an aromatic scent as acrid as though they were being broiled. The sand underfoot was slippery, like fine glass. Even the gallberry bushes writhed and shrivelled, and blueberries dried on their stems.

Lant and Cleve trudged across the open rough. The boys and dogs were on the trail of a wild cat that had eluded them. It had killed chickens in the very yard. A week ago it had gotten away with a new-born pig. Whenever Lant had set the dogs after it, it had taken to the swamp and gotten away. This time its tracks had led directly into the scrub.

They were on the second afternoon of the hunt. They carried guns, ammunition, matches, jerked venison and cornmeal to last them several days. Lant intended to run down the cat if it took the rest of the summer. A creature that stole from the yard and got safely away was a challenge that could not go unnoticed. The big cat had struck out across the very heart of the scrub. It must be headed for the bay-head flats, miles away.

Heat waves shimmered before their eyes, blinding them, mingling with the smart of their sweat. The scrub palmettos, tearing at their overalls, rattled like thick dry paper. They were barefooted and sharp dead limbs scratched their feet and the baking yellow sand seared the soles. Now and then they shifted their guns from one blistered shoul-

der to the other The dogs, Red and Black, no more than kept ahead of them, sniffing languidly at the wild-cat trail Their tongues lolled scarlet Their sides heaved Cleve was ready to go back

Lant said, "I be dogged if I do I ll not have that scoundrel chompin' on my chickens You go back if you want to"

Cleve said, blinking his eyes, 'I don't crave to backtrack alone"

"Come on, then"

They had spent the previous night not far from home, for they thought the dogs had treed the cat just after nightfall It was in a tall pine and they decided to wait for day light to cut it down When dawn came, the black masked face of a raccoon had peered at them from the pine boughs They had beaten the dogs for misleading them

Cleve said, 'Mought o' caught up with him if they'd had some sense"

Lant reminded him that they could have gone no farther in the night without a moon The trail was a little stale, for the cat had travelled all night It was hard to follow in any case on the bone-dry sand The sun reached down long tongues of yellow heat and licked up the scent of the cat-tracks The dogs were without sufficient water, for there were no creeks, no ponds, no lakes, no sink holes, for a ten mile radius

At sunset they were still in the scrub The area had gone unburned for many years and the close-crowded pines were tall To the north the boys made out an island of long leaf pine This indicated water They made for it and found a small spring fed pond It was bordered with cat tails and pink marsh mallows From among the water-hyacinths, blue cranes flew up slowly The dogs went belly-deep in the good water, and Lant and Cleve lay flat to lap with them

The dogs were glad to rest and lay quietly Cleve lay on his back, his arms under his head, while Lant sat with cocked gun, waiting for fox squirrels He was sure they would be fox squirrels They're piney woods jessies, he told his cousin The sun had been so hot that the squirrels were not anxious to feed As the sun dropped below the pines there came a chattering and two fox squirrels scurried down a near by pine trunk

Lant brought down the first one in motion The second leaped to an adjacent pine then flattened itself on the far side of the trunk The bushy black tail flickered in plain sight Lant moved a little to the side and dropped it One was as large as a pole-cat, and as glossy black It was a castrated male Lant wondered how the old males knew enough to wound the young ones, in their fierce squirrel battles, to their own advantage The second squirrel was tawny gold, with a black tail and black striped back and black velvet face mask It was a female with new young, for the breasts were full, and when he dressed it, the under side showed a network of milk filled glands

Lant was sorry to have killed her The skinned body looked like a naked baby with helpless arms He cut it in pieces, thinking of the young squirrels in the nest, their bright eyes peering into the sunset, their small whiskered mouths thirsty for milk, sweet with acorn and pine. He baked hoe-cakes of meal and water on a split slab of fresh green oak and roasted the pieces of squirrel on a stick over the coals Cleve had watched his face idly as he dressed the squirrels When Lant chose pieces from the large male, Cleve guessed the reason He reached over and pawed at the assortment

'Gimme one o' them belly pieces from the ol' mammy," he said slyly "Them leetle titties tastes perticler good"

Lant took a thigh deliberately from the same animal and

ate it savagely, tearing the strands apart with sharp teeth Red and Black snapped over the bones Cleve snickered

The sand gnats were troublesome and mosquitoes were plentiful They turned the cook fire into a smudge, and one or the other roused at intervals during the night to throw on a handful of leaves to keep the smoke going The pines were black above them, and stirred constantly as though restless Until daylight the frogs shrilled and the pond birds croaked and called and beat their wings As the east grew light, small birds of the scrub, silent through the day, trilled and twittered The wrens and jorees were noisiest, until woodpeckers and flickers began to drum There were few song birds The scrub was too vast, too lonely, too desolate, for song Only the solitary note of the thrush sounded, infinitely sweet and sad and forgotten

The boys made their breakfast on cold hoe-cake and venison They picked up the cat trail, which went around the pond They passed soon after sunrise through an open stretch of grass and scattered yellow pine A heavy dew had made the scent stronger They decided that cat fur, brushing against the grass, was as odorous to the dogs as the track of the pads, just as quail feathers carried more scent than the feet Black took a north-easterly cut, threw up his nose and bayed The cat had rested this time, too

High noon found them out of the open and into the almost impenetrable east scrub The pines crowded one another, myrtle and sparkleberry bushes filled the gaps, thorny vines laced back and forth, and wherever an inch of sunlight came through, saw palmettos sent up their jagged toothed fronds The dogs could not get through Their ears and tails were bloody Lant called them in and told Cleve to stay in one spot while he looked for a way out He believed they were not far from the river, which, across the north boundary of the scrub, ran from west to east. He thought, above the pervasive pine, that he smelled

swamp and river-bottom He cut widely to the west The scrub grew open again A yellow hammer flew ahead of him down the aisles of pine The scrub was clearing In stead of the cathedral half light, as though the sun came down from high small windows, the space ahead was bright Lant stepped suddenly out of the scrub and was on a dim wagon road Ahead was a low stretch of gallberry flats and beyond, a growth of small bay trees, 'the bay"

The precipitousness with which the scrub stopped always astonished Lant It rolled, a great ocean of scrawny pine, with boundaries sharper than any sea There were no pine breakers, feeling out an alien soil It was there, the scrub, immense, aloof and proud, standing on its own ground, making its own conditions, like no other When it ended, it ended, more implacably than a life, for there was some thing in a life that went on—a memory—a related life—a union with the earth, producing new growths and new lives The scrub made no unions The two swift rivers bounded it, a *fringe of hammock, of swamp, as here,* a strip of gallberry flats and bay head flats, within, it was inviolable.

It was uninhabited Where there was true scrub, there would never be human habitation It pleased the boy that he may have crossed where no man had ever crossed be fore. It pleased him, that he would come up on no clearing, no cabin, no clatter of human voices Here and there in the vast area was a lake, breeding place for alliga ors and for strange white birds There was always a settle ment on one of these, sometimes one or two low cabins, sometimes a small community of a dozen souls Even from these, with their spot of moisture, the scrub drew away, dry and disdainful With humankind, which must have water, it had no concern Old man Paine came the closest of any one to living in the scrub. His clearing was on a

high pine island, but even so, there was a pond at the foot of the slope

Lant would have been glad to have the old man with him now If the wild cat had rested the night before, as the actions of the dogs indicated, it must be headed for the flats Paine would know Lant followed the road, boggy even after the summer s heat If there were cat tracks, he could not be sure they belonged to the one they trailed They were all too weary to pick up a fresh cat His heart jumped Ahead of him, coming from the scrub, were tracks so recent that fine particles of dirt were at this mo ment crumbling from the edges He went back within calling distance of Cleve and set on the dogs

They bounded forward eagerly Black bayed, but Red was silent, intent not on the chase, but on the kill The tracks went down the faint over grown road a quarter of a mile, then swung into the scrub again Evidently the wild cat, too, had no taste for the flats Fresh scent of bear or panther might have turned him Then there was the sharp staccato barking of Black, and the rumbling that was Red going in head first, and he knew the cat had turned to face them

The boys ran towards the fracas They had trailed and camped burning days and nights for this moment Black, as was his custom, had the cat at bay The creature was large, its flat vicious head twice the width of either dog's The striped and mottled body, crouched at the base of a pine, was a trigger-quick tumult of fury The nose was wrinkled, the cat lips bared over dagger teeth For every sortie Black could make, there was a lightning thrust of a lifted paw

Then Red was in He dove in head foremost, blind to pain He clamped his jaws together on the tawny throat. His grip was not deep enough He had not caught the jugular vein The cat threw itself on its back, slashing

down with its hind feet to rip open the dog's belly Red knew the trick He swayed his body to the side and eased his hold The cat turned and sunk his fore claws behind the dog s ears Slowly, inexorably, against the dog s desperate bracing, it drew his face close Cleve danced madly around them

Lookit! Lookit! He slapped his thighs in delight 'He's a pullin' ol Red to him like they was goin' to kiss! '

Lant was tense Black, shrieking on the outskirts, watched him for a sign The cat was twice the weight of Red, but the dog liked to do his killing alone Blood streamed from his ears, but he resisted still With a sinuous twist the cat achieved the last inch and sunk his teeth in the dog s soft nose Lant snapped his fingers

Git him, Black"

The smaller dog went in His jaws met through the nape of the thick cat neck There was the sound of teeth on bone As the cat relaxed, Red broke free When he took the soft throat this time, it was forever his

The boys watched quietly as the dogs finished the wild cat The hide was too torn to be worth the skinning and they left the animal lying where it died They took the narrow road west again between scrub and gallberry Black was hurt a little, but Red was well mangled Both dogs were often crippled for several days after a cat fight It did not impair their zest for the hunt They always killed their cat, and they were always ready, with half healed wounds, to go back for more Red whimpered and sat down in the road One ear was ripped half away, his nose was swollen, a triangular flap hung from one thigh where the big cat had used his slashing hind claws. The dog had bled much He was in pain and exhausted Lant slung him across his shoulders, as he carried a deer, holding each set of legs in either hand The red bristles scratched the back of his neck and the dog's heat mingled

with his own Sweat streamed from under his hanging forelock.

The boys wanted to make for the river, running parallel with the river, half a mile away across the flats It was an impenetrable half mile and they did not dare attempt it The ground beneath the gallberries was boggy The bayhead flats, where a few of the bay trees bloomed late and in deceptive sweetness, were thick and swampy, the haunts of bear and panther They were afraid to cross them with fresh blood on the dogs Cleve stared uneasily across the *desolate stretch The flats made the scrub itself seem civil*ised The sun beat down the open road, too high overhead for the scrub on their left to cast the slightest cooling shadow The hotter the sun, the more aromatic the pines. Lant drew the sweet warm spice into his nostrils and hitched the drooping dog higher They stopped every few hundred yards to rest

Lant said, "You tote him a ways, Cleve"

"I ain't goin' to tote no damn dog"

"All right, mister You ain't got it to do You're jest plain sorry, that's what you are Try an' git to go huntin' with me agin, jest try"

"Don't know as I keer to try Hit ain't pleasured me too much, no-ways"

Walking on angrily, Lant missed the trail he had intended to take When he found that he had passed it, he decided to head on farther for the old Riverside Settlement He had not been here before His grandfather had told him that it was deserted but it amazed him to find the wilderness where he had pictured prosperity The Big Freeze of '95 had wiped out the strangers' orange plantings, Lantry had said All their money had been in grove They knew no other way to make a living, and almost over*night they had packed up and gone away.*

Here and there a good two-story house was standing,

intact with all its cypress fencing Here a house had been torn down by lumbermen or hunters to make a camp on the river Forest fire had come through in irrational streaks and wiped out most of them Brick chimneys stood, gaunt monuments to fire Sometimes one stretch of fence had burned, and not another The settlement was desolate Only crepe myrtle survived, and oleander, planted by men and yet somehow indigenous They bloomed pink and white across the abandoned clearings Lant stared at the waste he had long thought of as a city

Dogged if I couldn t of made a livin' on that good land '

He marvelled that men should have owned cleared acres and good houses, and then, afraid of going hungry, should have hurried away Perhaps it was not hunger that frightened them Perhaps, like Lantry, they did not belong here It might be that adversity was only the last straw in the burden of a wider desolation The scrub had defeated them The boy was glad they had gone He hated these vanished people and pitied them

He knew that an old landing should be here The scrub had closed in on both sides of an old road and he looked to his right for a trail that should lead to the river He found a dim track, tangled with wild pea vines, and turned to follow it The pea vines were a mass of pale lavender bloom It occurred to him that the few flowers of the scrub were bright gold, yellow as the strong sunlight which reached them through a break in the pines, or, like the wild peas, were this dim shade of orchid, washed thin and fragile by the shadows The sea myrtle, its leaves the same grey green as his mother's sage plants, bore in winter puffed clusters of sweet lavender bloom The rosemary flowered in a stouter purple

The track he was following led, as he surmised it must, to an old river landing A wooden runway went across

the black muck, ending in a platform at the edge of the swamp The platform overlooked the river It ran here dark and swift The boys sat on the landing, hanging their feet in the red brown river water Lant bathed both dogs Red was refreshed and tottered to the shallow junction of swamp and river, cooling his slashed flanks He lapped as though he would never get enough The water tasted musty from long running at the feet of oak and magnolia and cypress, their leaves dropping perpetually in humid decay

In the afternoon, the sun behind the scrub, so that the entire width of the river was in shadow, a freight boat came puffing up from Palatka The boys hailed the captain, who recognised them The season had been dry and the river edge was too shallow for the boat to warp in close to the landing Zeke Lantry was on board He had been to Palatka to buy Kezzy a new cook stove He called to the boys to wade to the boat It reversed its engine, so that the sweep of the river current brought it towards them as they plunged, holding their guns high over their heads The dogs followed Red hesitated an instant midway and turned again for shore Lant dropped back into the water to encourage him The dog swam to meet him and they came side by side to the boat rail Zeke pulled them in

The boat crew gave the boys tobacco The men sat on the shallow decks and asked questions about the cat fight They liked fighting dogs They offered Red and Black scraps of food left in their dinner buckets Red was too e hausted to want food He patted his tail in thanl s and turned his head away Cleve bragged about Black

I mean, he hilt that big ol wild cat to the bay Hit were a turrible rumpus"

Lant spat loftily "'Twa'n't no more of a fight than they gin'rally gits into," he said

The river men told of all the cat fights they had seen They talked of panthers and of bears Most of them knew

no more than the fringe of the scrub They were vaguely afraid of it

'Don't you come up on a heap o' rattlesnakes?'

Cleve said swaggeringly, "A mighty heap"

But Lant said, 'Sho, they ain't bothersome I mind me one time not seein' 'em skeert me more'n seein' 'em I walked into a fern-brake and the ferns was jest now springin' back where somethin' had goed thu 'em Plumb in the centre was two broke-off snake rattles One had eighteen rattles and 'tother had twenty I never did come up with the rattlers had jest done fought there And not knowin' where they was at, skeert me worse'n seein' the snakes theirselves"

They asked him, "Don't you fellers git losted in the scrub?'

Cleve did not answer He could not keep his directions half a mile from home

Lant said, 'I ain't been losted yit"

'What you go by? You always know where north lies?"

'I don't pay no pertickler attention to north They's landmarks for them knows 'em Jar Hill and Hog pen Stand and Buzzard's Roost and Buckskin Pararie and sich as that When the sun's shinin', I go by the sun, and the moon's good he'p when it's showin' If they ain't no sun, and it cloudy or drizzlin', the wind s the best way to tell Times, it blows from the river, times, from the scrub—don't matter which a way, long as you keeps track of it If it changes, you belong to notice the change. And if they ain't no sun nor wind nor moon, the trees theirselves is a good sign"

'How's that?"

"Why," he was impatient with their ignorance, "the '71 storm done bended the tall pine trees towards the south-west"

An old man nodded

"I mind me The big storm from the north-east Hit blowed for three days and hit rained and purely loosened the roots"

"That's the one That's how I tell"

The captain had been a river man all his life

"I could watch the sun and moon and wind," he said, 'and still get lost in that place I ve got no taste for such lonesome country And dry I like a place where I can get water to drink And whiskey, too"

Zeke said, "I never heerd o' nobody in the scrub goin' short o' whiskey"

They laughed

"That were when you was makin' it, Zeke You shouldn't of quit"

'You mighty right I shouldn't never of quit"

The river had made its right angled turn The freight boat was moving due south Towards sunset it swung past the entrance to Taylor's Dread Zeke nudged Lant and jerked his head in its direction The boy nodded

'I remember, a'right" He grinned at his uncle "'Member them hogs the day we all come down?' He lowered his voice "I been trappin' Ma some wild hogs been actin' jest like unto that I reckon hit's one o' the Poseys has got him a outfit 'bout a mile down the swamp Them hogs is so wild you cain't come up on 'em lessen they're staggerin' drunk. Ma's been rarin' for some more hogs—the 'gators keeps 'em cleaned out so bad—and I been pennin' 'em up when they come by from eatin' Posey's mash I got five a'ready, come by too drunk to see"

'You're shore they're wild, now?"

"Ain't nary one branded"

"A'right Don't want you raisin' stock the way Ab raise it"

Lant frowned

"I don't believe them things about Uncle Ab"

Zeke laughed

"You've thought a heap of him since he gave you them dogs Ol' Bull bat's all right, I reckon He jest looks out for hisself"

'Bull bat?"

'I hears folks call him and his old lady, 'Bull bat and Whip-poor will' Jest somethin' about them"

Lant laughed

'Sort o' pussle gutted, eh?"

The boat was to tie up at the old company camp south of Otter Landing The river was in total darkness The boys were drowsy When the boat docked they were the first ashore The dogs followed with lowered heads They cut up the slope and walked silently home

Lant clicked the gate latch and scuffled up the path to the cabin Red and Black crawled underneath and began to lick noisily on their wounds Cleve went to the smokehouse

'That you, Lant?"

Piety was waiting for him in the dark The small figure in its light print dress wavered to the doorway

"I figgered you boys was gone a'most too long"

'We was all right We ain't no young uns. Leastways, I ain't Cleve's a sorry piece"

"What's the matter with Cleve?"

"Oh—jest sorry"

'Well," she prodded him, "did you come up with your wild cat?"

'We come up with him He won't never be no deader'n he is now"

"Is the dogs tore up?"

'They're tore up right smart"

Her pulse pounded in her ears, hearing his voice close in the yard again

"Where's Cleve?"

"Puttin' his snout in your wine"

"What you doin' out there in the yard?"

"Lookin' at where these sons o' bitches is diggin' outen the hog pen"

"Hit s that male hog," she said fervently "He's like to drove me crazy and you and Cleve not here to nail him in good I was feerd he'd git pen sick, shut up so long, but he's jest a rarin'"

"Yes, and the skew tailed bastard'll go on a rarin' 'til he gits the pen tore up And oncet he do git loose, you've seed the last of him He ll be off like a jug handle"

He joined her in the breezeway

'I don't know as I want no more wild hogs," she said

"I told you they wa'n't easy penned"

She tried to see his face in the hot night He was sweaty and his eyes and high cheekbones glistened The smell of him was different from that of other boys and men There was a scent she thought she would always recognise. It was an earthy musk, like an animal that bedded in dry leaves Its pungency was threaded with something sweet and compounded, as though pine needles had been crushed with swamp muck and fish scales and blueberries. There was perhaps as well an odour that lingered on him from her own body, a mark by which a female might always know her young

She asked, "You boys or the dogs want supper?"

"We all hongry You got ary thing good?"

She said defensively, "How'd I know when you was comin' back? You goes off on them j'ants and stays off and stays off I cooked yestiddy and I had it to throw out Me and the cats don't eat as much as you and Cleve and the dogs Nothin' don't keep and the days so warm. I ain't cooked today"

He was prowling through the wire screened kitchen safe. He turned with his mouth full.

"You got biscuit puddin' That's good, ain't it?"

"I forgot I had biscuit puddin'"

Cleve came to the house, wiping his mouth He too hunted through the kitchen safe

Lant went to the edge of the breezeway and threw a handful of cornbread under the house for the dogs Piety's tom-cat, greeting him, reared against him, clawing with pleasure He shook his leg free

'Git! Git! You ol' jib-cat——"

The animal persisted in its attentions

'*Git now! I'll beat your butt!*'

"Lant," the woman shrilled indignantly, "if that ain't a pretty way to talk!'

The boy used the language of the Florida backwoods It was not objectionable to Piety, for it was used by most men and many women without offensive intent She had often heard "son of a bitch' spoken by her father and brothers with an amount of tenderness 'Bastard' as an epithet was more casual than obscene Here she drew the line

'Big as you be," *she threatened him*, "I'll take a bresh to you!"

XIV

Daylight in September was coming noticeably later Piety wakened in the greyness with a feeling of hurry She had been getting up all summer at five o clock Now it was six when she went to the kitchen to build her fire for breakfast She put on grits to cook and decided it was time to start the coffee pot with fresh grounds She had added to the old ones for a week, and Lant was particular She was measuring coffee by the window in the dim light when she heard Red rumble faintly in the yard and Kezzy spoke to him The girl came quietly in the back door

The woman said, 'You stirrin' mighty early, Kezzy"

"Lant said the mockin' birds was gittin' the grapes so fast I'd best come right quick Zeke goed acrost the river yestiddy, lookin' for work He ain't back yit You know how 'tis when you re alone in a house all night You ain't afeerd, but you wakens soon of a mornin', listenin', somehow"

'I know Seems to me the hoot-owls and me puts in the night together, when Lant's off It's a sight better with Cleve here"

'I think it's fine the pore feller kin be here They're both good boys They ain't up yit, I s'pose"

She tiptoed across the breezeway and peered in Cleve lay on his back on Lantry's small bed in the front room His mouth was wide open in his round face. The door to Lant's bedroom was ajar She looked through the crack.

"They're a pretty pair," she said 'I declare, Aunt Py-tee, come look at this young un o' your'n"

The woman joined her at the door The quilt over the sleeping youth was an old one It was worn threadbare and Lant was enmeshed in it His knotty legs were pushed through the rents and his long brown arms were flung wide at his sides

Kezzy said, 'Dogged if he don't look like a crab in a net'

Her voice wakened him and he raised up, pushing his red forelock out of his eyes

'What the devil Mess o' women peekin' in a man's room"

Cleve roused in the front room and sat up in bed

'Hey, Kezzy, he said drowsily

He watched her with pale sleepy eyes

He said, drawling, Kezzy, come git right plumb in the bed with me, or git out so s I kin git up

She laughed

'I ll git out '

The women went back to the kitchen Kezzy sat on a stool and tended the fire

'Aunt Py tee, is all your quilts in the fix that one o' Lant's is in?'

'They're all mighty nigh as bad I got fifteen belonged to Ma The summer ones, like that un, is holes and nothin' else. My big winter ones is purely ravelled along the edges"

You better leave me he'p you cover 'em You got ary piecin' done?'

'I got me a few kivers pieced They're the Lighthouse and the Log Cabin patterns"

'Them's pretty"

"And I got a heap o' scraps cut and basted, Turkey red calico I got a idee I d like to make a quilt for ol' Doc Lorimer outen that Turkey red, with white. I'd like to use the pattern o' the Right Hand o' Fellowship"

'I'll he'p you do that thing You got plenty rain water? We'll set in and wash all the quilts is to be covered'

She went outside and began to carry water from the cistern to the tubs The boys came to the kitchen to their breakfast and Cleve sat down and began to fill his plate Lant went to the side of the house to speak to Red and Black The dogs came to meet him Their cat wounds had healed in clean welts They wagged ingratiating tails

'You 'bout ready for another cat hunt," he said

Piety brought out an armful of quilts and piled them in the tubs and went to her breakfast Lant ate hurriedly and reached for his cap

'Where you goin' today?' the woman demanded 'You been huntin' all week You ain't been home scarcely long enough to warm the bed, and now you're gone agin '

'I got to go look up Uncle Ab's cattle He won't likely drive 'em up 'til cooler weather, but I got to know whereall they're at

You got a yearlin' comin' to you this time, ain't you? You takin' the dogs?"

'I reckon they're plenty fitten You goin' with me, Cleve?'

The older boy hesitated Lant turned in the doorway

'You better stay and he'p the women folks," he said

Cleve did not answer

Lant said, "Wrop me up some biscuits, Ma"

He shouldered his gun and called the dogs He looked around the corner to speak to Kezzy She was standing in a washtub, tramping the suds into the quilts with her bare feet She threw back her head and laughed when she saw him He stood watching her She was full grown, deep-breasted and heavily built Her black eyebrows met over a firm nose Her thick smooth hair had shaken loose and hung black against the white of her skin, brushed about the mouth and ears with a fine down Her eyes

were large and sweet like blackberries in the sun Lant felt warm and friendly

He said, "You do a good day's work for Ma That's what I'm payin' you wages for,' and went away with the dogs

Piety and Kezzy had eight quilts ready for the line by high noon Cleve had tagged at their heels all morning They put him at work at the last wringing He helped to carry the heavy pieces to the clothes line He was amiable and joked with them They had used most of Piety's home made soap on the quilts and before they went into the house for dinner they wet down a bed of hardwood ashes over loose boards In three days Piety would be able to filter the drippings through broom-straw and use the resulting liquid lye with her collected meat fats to make a hardy yellow soap

After dinner Kezzy stretched herself flat on the floor of the breezeway to rest and dry out in the September sun She was wet through with soap suds and sweat She clasped her hands under her head and closed her eyes. Cleve sprawled beside her and drew his finger slowly along the line of her chin She paid no attention to him and drowsed a little Piety sat near them, rocking, her deep lids low over her eyes, one hand half over her mouth Her lips moved a little, savouring the sweetness of her after-dinner snuff

'*I never thought to ask you did you want a leetle snuff. Kezzy*"

"I wouldn't keer for it, Aunt Py-tee" The girl's voice was thick and sleepy "I someways never could like it"

"Gimme a mite," Cleve said "I'm out of t'baccy Seems like I'm always out" He sighed "I shore wisht I could find me a piece o' work"

Kezzy said, "You ain't tried for a month, have you?"

"No use tryin' They's nothin' this time o' yare."

"Zeke's figgerin' on turpentinin' if he cain't git nothin' else"

"Chippin' boxes—I know He's welcome. That's nigger work"

"You're no better'n Zeke," she said quietly

Piety said, "Leave him be, Kezzy Cleve's jest more'n welcome here He pays his way, totin' wood and sich"

"He eats the weight o' the stove wood," she said

He grinned and dropped a few grains of sand on her throat

"You'd starve me if you had it to do, wouldn't you, Kezzy?"

She sat up, smiling a little

Now you got me hongry agin," she said "I'm goin' to go eat scuppernong grapes if they kill me"

It's nearly last chance," Piety said

The three went to the south field Lant had built a new arbour and the vine covered a space sixty feet by thirty A stem the size of a man's arm coiled up from the sand, bursting at the top into an immense expanse of lace like leaves and branches The grapes grew singly, as big as hog plums, and the colour of old gold They stood in the fretted shade and ate from the vine

"They don't taste half as sweet, time you bring 'em in the house," Kezzy said

In mid afternoon Lant found them still eating scuppernongs, popping them languidly into their mouths He was frowning He pushed under the arbour

"Cleve," he asked, "when you was acrost the river last, did you hear ary thing about the Alabamy feller was contractin' for the Moody homestead up above Uncle Thad's old place?"

"No more'n he were contractin'."

Kezzy said, "Zeke said the deal was about to go thu. What's the matter?"

"The scaper's moved in and dogged if he ain't fenced in about two square mile o' worthless scrub"

"Fenced it in!"

Cleve and the women looked at him, gaping

"You heerd me right I come up on Ab's cattle towards Cedar Landing They re pore as snakes, and their tongues hangin' out for water Me and the dogs drove 'em a ways and they turned back agin us Here, bless Katy, I finds me a three-strand barbed wire fence, cuttin' 'em off from the ol' run to the river They hadn't found 'em a new way around I drove 'em to the swamp near Uncle Thad s place and they was about give out"

Piety said, "Well, I do know What you fixin' to do?"

"I m goin' to Uncle Ab right now"

Cleve was all good nature

He said, 'I ll row you, Lant You been walkin' all day"

Kezzy laughed

'Look at 'em, Aunt Py tee, pleased as spring roosters 'cause they's signs of a fuss Cleve's the worst"

'I b lieve he is I b'lieve Cleve do love a ruckus a mite more'n Lant"

'Pertickler if it's the other feller fussin'," Cleve said

The cousins went eagerly across the clearing and through the hammock to cross the river They found Abner Lantry at his farm Lant reported the presence in the scrub of the Alabaman and his fence Abner, big and ruddy, cursed smoothly in a casual voice When he stopped to spit, Lant asked, "What you fixin' to do? Move the cattle?"

"Hell, no If he don't do what's right, move the man"

He stroked his chin

'Zeke said he'd be by here this evenin' 'fore he goes back acrost to the scrub I'll git aholt o' Syl Jacklin and Luke Saunders—they got cattle that side the river"

Lant asked, "Mus' I go git the Half-breed? He's got a mess o' cattle and hogs thu there"

Half breed Tine lived in a shack above Riverside He was believed to have negro blood He was known to be a hog thief

Abner said, "I don't want nobody like that into it I aim to talk sense to this Alabamy feller and fix things civilised"

"Where you want Cleve and me to meet you, Uncle Ab?"

'Le's see 'Bout a hour after sun up we'd best meet at Zeke's"

They nodded, lifting their hands in parting

Abner said after them, "Much obliged, boys"

They reached the cabin after sunset Piety had supper waiting for them Cleve rose from the table, picking his teeth

"What time did Kezzy go, Aunt Py tee?"

"'Bout a half hour to sun If you're goin' down there, tell her to come stay with me agin tomorrer if Zeke's fixin' to git into the row You goin' down too, Lant?"

He stretched his long legs under the table and yawned

'Not me I want a piece o' sleep too bad I done walked a good twenty mile today"

Lant, lean and brown at sixteen, looked as old as his cousin at eighteen, perhaps because Cleve's round face stayed boyish Watching the older boy walk off towards Kezzy in the dusk, Piety thought that it was like watching the development of cockerels in successive hatchings of chickens

XV

TWELVE men from the piney woods met at Zeke Lantry's place and walked down the scrub road to the Moody homestead Lant walked in front with Abner and Zeke Red and Black trailed him Cleve dropped back to talk with Lem Posey The lean faces of the men were taciturn under broad-brimmed black slouch hats They were unarmed, their hands hanging open at their sides Only the stillness of the faces was ominous They went through the Ala baman's gate and into his yard Debris lay about where he had begun to enlarge the old Moody house.

The new owner walked out and Abner said courteously, "My name s Lantry, and these here men is my friends and kin folks'

The stranger said, 'What you want? I m busy"

Abner asked, '*Is it you done fenced in consid able scrub?*"

'I ve fenced in the land I ve paid for"

Abner pulled his lip

'Don t' matter what you ve paid for, Mister All of us has homestidded or paid for our land, and we never had nary cattle fence amongst us We fences our yards and the fields we're croppin' and sich as that But now stock has always been free to come and go in these parts, both sides o' the river Your stock is welcome to go acrost my land and the land of all these here men But, Mister, we aim for our stock to go acrost yours'

'You're wasting your time if that's what you're here about"

"That's what we're here about"

"Well, you just go on about your business"

Abner's thick neck swelled and turned crimson

"Mister, we're here peaceable, but if you aim to act that-a way, you'll jest natchelly find your fences cut"

The Alabaman was a bully He made sure they had no guns before he reached for his own, standing on his porch.

"You damn Crackers get going," he said "You keep off my land and keep your stock off '

Abner asked quietly, 'You want trouble?"

'Yes, I want trouble, if that's all you know"

He shot deliberately over their heads Three or four ducked instinctively and Red and Black turned tail and ran out of the yard He shot again, this time to one side. Abner moved swiftly, so that the stranger did not see what he was doing From the carpenter tools scattered about, incident to the building, he picked up a ten penny nail and a hammer He turned his back on the rifle and walked to the gate The others half turned to follow A massive live-oak stood by the gate post The hoary Spanish moss, festooned almost to the ground, stirred as Abner moved to it. With a few sharp blows he drove the nail an inch or so into the tree The men crowded after him, their eyes on the Alabaman, who came too, but warily, afraid of being rushed Abner pointed to the spike

Mister," he said, "when that ten penny nail is done drove in that oak-tree plumb to the head—you be gone from here."

He closed one eye leisurely, squinting out of the other

'I mean, long gone,' he said.

They moved off down the road The Alabaman gaped after them They went silently as far as Zeke's place, then sat down to talk There was little to say

Syl Jacklin asked, "How long you studyin' to give him to git?"

"'Bout a week."

"You want somebody should slip up and drive the spike 'bout a half inch or inch a day, eh?"

'That's right."

"You want we should all take turns?"

Abner's eye fell on Lant and Cleve He looked, calculating, from one to the other. Cleve stooped and began to pick sand spurs from the hems of his pincheck trousers Lant grinned at Abner and the man grinned back at him

Abner said, "How 'bout it, Lant?'

Lant said, "You all best leave me do it I'm right here I ain't workin' until trappin' begins, jest messin' around, huntin' deer and sich, sellin' the saddles when I kin '

Syl Jacklin asked, "What you gittin' for 'em?"

'Dime or so a pound Wisht I'd been huntin' when them passenger boats was on the river. They quit runnin' 'bout the time I commenced huntin' reg'lar. Them scapers paid forty cents a pound"

Syl said, "That were good money."

Lant said, "I make sufficient now. Ma don't complain"

There was a silence

Zeke said uneasily, "Don't seem right, lettin' a young feller take the risk"

Syl said, "That's right That bastard ll cut down on ary thing he see move."

Lant spat contemptuously.

"He cain't hit me I kin move faster amongst them pines than he kin watch me"

Abner nodded

'They's no special risk. Leave the boy do it."

They agreed

Zeke said, "But now if they's much shootin', somebody else got to git into it."

They nodded and began to break up to go home. Lant

started down the road with Cleve He turned to Abner, moving towards the river

'Uncle Ab!'

'What you want?'

"What you fixin' to do time I git the spike drove in and the feller ain t gone?'

Abner laughed, shaking his ponderous chest

How come you askin' sich triflin questions?"

He said softly, watching the grave young face, 'Fixin' to git jest a leetle rougher, son

Lant brightened He would have felt foolish slipping up to drive in a spike that meant nothing

The Alabaman ignored the ten penny nail for a day or two, or was not aware that it had sunk deeper It was undisturbed the first two times Lant slipped up to the gate, just after dusk, and gave it a measured blow The third time when he came, it had been pulled out He had considered this possibility, for he would have done the same He replaced it with another that he carried for the purpose On the fourth night he made out the figure of the man sitting beside the gate The glimmering of the late twilight struck the gun barrel in the watcher s hands Lant squatted noiselessly on his haunches to wait He could outwait a squirrel hiding in a palmetto, a snake in a hole, a catamount in a tree, he was in no hurry now

Until midnight there was no sound except a vague restlessness from the stranger He shifted his position occasionally He was sitting on a chair or box Once it scraped against the wooden gate. Now and then he coughed softly or cleared his throat Lant could not see him move, but at last he heard him stir, heard the even crunch that was the sound of a man's feet walking on sand He let the sound no more than fade, to run to the tree, for if the man was smart, this was a ruse, and he would return in an instant The nail was there He struck it lightly, his ham-

mer head muffled this time with the shirt he had taken off to wrap around it He ran on soundless bare feet down the road It was like fishing for a bass that struck and got away It was good sport to keep after him

At breakfast he said to Piety and Cleve, "This ruckus is mighty good fun I b lieve I'm obliged to drive that nail a mite slower"

Cleve said, 'I'll spell you off, Lant"

'You shore won t You lost your chancet when you didn't speak up to Uncle Ab

The next two nights the Alabaman kept vigil all night long directly under the live-oak He was in position when the boy arrived, so still that Lant checked himself only in time from walking up on him He had to stop in his tracks, much closer than he cared to be in case an accident gave him away He made up his mind that if ants stung him, or a small animal startled him, or a snake crossed his feet, he would not stir

The Alabaman sat almost as quiet There was a time towards morning when Lant was afraid that he would not know if the man dropped to sleep But as the first grey light appeared in the east, he heard a heavy sighing under the live-oak that must, he thought, be slumber That too might be a trick He waited In a little while there came an unmistakable snore Lant crept in, struck the spike over the sleeper's head and was gone without awakening him

The next night he did not fare so well The watcher must have been on the alert most of the day, expecting this time a daylight visit, but he was at his post at dark Lant was able to choose a safer position from a distance He did not dare come in so close again He had seen tracks over a wide radius where the man had hunted him This time the Alabaman, exhausted, fell asleep a little earlier Keyed to a high pitch, his sleep was light and restless, for when

Lant, hearing him snore, moved in and sunk the nail to its head, some sound registered

There was the frenzied "Eh, eh, eh!" of a man startled from a nightmare slumber, and the figure started up under the boy's withdrawn arm Lant was off likke a dear, but he was seen A rifle bullet whined over him, snipping off a small limb The man was shooting high, but Lant ran madly to get out of range He slowed down only when he was opposite Zeke's clearing The night was black, and hearing the hoot-owls cry, and rabbits stirring in the ham mock, he knew the south moon was under him

The direct encounter unnerved the Alabaman; or he was already at the end of his tether The next day he packed his household goods in his wagon and drove across on the ferry at the Springs, his face drawn and ugly He was not seen again, and Lant took down the fencing and wound it into rolls Abner gave him a yearling and told him to keep the fencing The big red man laughed deeply

"Them Alabamy fellers is got no chitlin's," he said He waggled a portentous finger at the youth "Now you see, son, how nice it be to settle things peaceable and civilised"

XVI

The first October nor'easter blew in grey gusts across the scrub Beyond the immediate beating of rain against the Lantry cabin, there sounded a low roar that was the movement of pine trees in the wind The small east windows rattled in loose frames, and a sudden spurt of water, hissing against the panes, dripped in around the edges The night was raw and after supper Piety built a small fire on the hearth in the front room and drew her rocker close to it [illegible] ugh walls and u [illegible] crackled, and th [illegible] id rain seemed to move farther away

Cleve lay on his stomach in front of the hearth, studying the almanac. Lant sat in a corner, picking idly at his banjo

Cleve said, "We better be changin' them two boars, Aunt Py tee, if you aim to make fitten barrows outen 'em in time to butcher on the first cold"

"We're some late now,' she said "See what the zodiKe signs is for this week"

"That s what I m lookin' for now No, 'twon't do Hit comes right on Scorpion"

"'Twon't do," she agreed "That's in the Secrets They d bleed to death"

He traced the calendar days with his forefinger

'The knees or legs or feet is best," she said

'Here's the Goat—here s the Water man" His finger rested "Here you are, Aunt Py-tee. Monday week the sign's the Two Fishes."

"Monday week, Lant," she repeated 'You remember, now'

He nodded and began a tune on the banjo He loved it as Lantry had done He played with his grandfather's fervour, but he had his mother s peculiar timelessness He picked out the tune before he began to sing He played tied up in knots, his long legs intertwined, his bony elbows at right angles, his crane's neck looped in a passionate absorption over the instrument

'Somebody stole my ol 'coon dog—
Wish they d bring him back
He'd chase the big hogs over the fence,
The little ones thu the crack"

Cleve said, turning the pages of the almanac, 'Way I heerd that, 'twere about a feller 'stead of a dog, and it said, 'He'd chase the big girls over the fence, the little ones thu the crack'"

Lant threw back his head and patted his foot in rhythm with his tune He sang in a high nasal minor, his forelock dangling over his closed eyes

"Raccoon is a cunnin thing—
Travels in the dark
Don't know what trouble is
'Til he hears ol Ranger bark"

Piety's turtle lidded eyes blinked at him as he played She watched him with a half smile He began a tune for which he knew no words She reached up to the mantel for the mail-order catalogue She turned the pages with a luxurious slowness, seeing articles on every page it would be pleasant to have Kezzy called it "the wish book," she recalled She had plenty of underwear and towels, made of

flour and sugar sacking, but she needed unbleached muslin for sheets

Her eyesight troubled her and she hitched her rocker closer to the fire, so that the light wavered across the book She strained her eyes to make out the description under a picture of a bargain bundle of remnants

"Neat small prints in blue and grey and brown 10 yards for 79c."

She was so small that very little material made her a dress She sewed laboriously by hand, making her dresses after the pattern she had used for ten years She put together a sleeve pattern, long and full, gathered into a band at the wrist, a waist pattern that came to the throat, with a turned back collar and buttoned down the front, and a skirt pattern, long and full The bargain bundle was just what she wanted It would make dresses for a year or two She needed shoes She went barefooted often about the house, but for farm and garden work she needed to be heavily shod She turned to the pictures of boys' shoes and thumbed the page that showed a pair, high and thick soled and sturdy, at $1 69 She laid down the catalogue and drew a salt sack from behind the clock on the mantel She turned the handful of loose silver into her lap and counted it slowly, moving her lips Lant slid the banjo across the floor and came to her side He squatted on his heels by her chair He reached a bony hand into the change and clawed it over

"That all we got, Ma?"

"That's all I declare, it don't last"

"It shore won't last us 'til trappin' money comes in"

Cleve looked up from the almanac, flushing His full lips quivered

He said in a low voice, "I better go"

Piety said quickly, "You hush, Cleve. I reckon Marthy's

boy's jest plumb welcome to what we got, long as we got it"

He laid one cheek against the almanac and threw one arm over his face His voice came, whining

'Ma wouldn't of wanted I should dis furnish you all"

Piety and Lant exchanged startled glances

Lant said anxiously, "Cleve, we didn't mean nothin', talkin' about the money"

You shore did You was throwin' off on me"

'We wasn't nothin' o' the sort I ain't brought in a penny myself since early summer We always gits to figgerin' this time o' year"

"*I better go You got no way to git money 'fore trappin' time*'

Piety said, "Cleve, I cain't bear you should talk that away We'll jest all go hongry together, if need be'

Lant said sharply, 'Ain't nobody goin' to go hongry"

He began to walk up and down the room, his hands in his pockets, his chin sunk on his chest

Piety *thought*, "*He ain't old enough to be worryin' about* things the way Pa done"

His shadow followed him, leaping from wall to wall as he turned, twice as long as he, twice as gangling He paced so for half an hour His concentration lightened The red brown eyes snapped

'They's as good cypress logs sunk in the creek and along *the old landin's on the river*," he *said*, "*as them timberin'* scapers ever rafted"

Piety brought her small, work-twisted hand over her mouth in the familiar gesture

"I heerd you say that a yare ago," she nodded She added thoughtfully, "Hit'd be a pain to git it out"

'"Twould," he agreed, "but cash money is cash money *Cypress is still worth twelve dollars a thousand*"

'You ain't got the strength for it," she said "Nor Cleve ain't got the strength to he p you"

Cleve sat up He sniffled self-consciously

Lant said, "I don't aim for Cleve to he p me. Way I sees it is this We belong to have us a good fall garden"

Hit had orter be in now," Piety said 'Worryin' about you and that Alabamy feller put the work outen my mind"

'The ground had orter be ploughed and bedded up right now,' he agreed 'The sweet pertaters had orter be dug on the next full moon There s hogs to be butchered on the full moon, if it's cold If you ll take in and do my portion o' sich work, Cleve, I kin git at them sunken logs I aim to git me ol' Ramrod Simpson to he'p me raise 'em and raft 'em down to Palatka He s been loggin' it alone since the cypress company quit the river That a way we'll have garden stuff and pork and cash money all comin' in 'bout the same time Then hit'll be time to trap agin You and me kin trap together, Cleve"

Cleve studied his fingers He absorbed their anxiety with satisfaction

"A'right," he said He grinned

'Ol' Ramrod Simpson! He s crazy, Lant," he reminded him

'The pore ol' feller's cold-out crazy," Lant agreed, 'but he s strong as ary bull and he makes a mighty clever raft"

Piety put away the salt sack of silver and Cleve began to turn the pages of the almanac.

Lant asked, 'Ma, were Ramrod always crazy?"

She chuckled

Long as I ve knowed him," she said, "but ol' Granny Jacklin used to say he wa'n't no crazier'n no other boy, 'til the preacher baptised him in the river"

Cleve said, "I ve always figgered a feller was crazy to git baptised, but I never figgered a baptisin' 'd make you crazy"

"'Twa'n't the baptisin' itself The preacher were jest visitin' and he hadn't never baptised in the Ocklawaha Granny says she tol him to watch for the hole, but he got to prayin' and didn't pay no mind to where he were leadin' Ramrod First thing he knowed, he were in to his neck, and when he dipped Ramrod he like to drowned him He scratched for land and cracked pore Ramrod s head on a rock, haulin' him out Granny says he wa'n't never right agin Now I won't tell it for fact That's jest Granny s tale'

Hit sound likely,' Lant said 'Must be some reason he hate Jesus Christ the way he do" The boy stretched out his neck and imitated Ramrod s high rusty voice and cleft palate "'Dod damn ol Desus Chwist!'"

Cleve guffawed with him and Piety s small frame shook

'That s him a right, she said Now Lant, you be keer ful You cusses bad enough 'thout takin' on none o' Ramrod s

They went to bed smiling about Ramrod

In the morning the nor easter still blew Lant and Cleve spent the day indoors, their heads together over Lant s assortment of traps Sitting cross legged on the floor, the dark red head against the round light one, it seemed to Piety they lost the look of men that often startled her Because they seemed suddenly young she went to the kitchen and made them a pan of syrup candy They filled their mouths and chewed and argued amiably through the afternoon Cleve s pasty face was smug

The storm cleared on the third day The early October air was crisp and clear, and the fronds of palmettos glit tered against the sharp blue of the sky The change had brought a suggestion of frost, so that the persimmon trees in the clearing were bronzed, and the fruit stood out like small orange lanterns Cleve hitched Piety's old mule to

the turn plow. He whistled, puckering his mouth in his round face

Lant said, "I'm gone," and went past the persimmons on the trail to the river landing It was eleven o'clock when he reached Eureka He went to the store to ask Ramrod Simpson's whereabouts and found the man himself in its dark, odorous interior, buying dried navy beans

"Hey, Lant," he said

"Howdy, Ramrod I want to see you when you git done your business."

"I'm done now"

Lem Posey came in the store He jerked his thumb at Ramrod

He said over his shoulder to Lant, He buys whatever's cheapest—black-eyed peas, beans, anything Today it's navy beans" He lifted his voice, although Ramrod was not deaf. He winked at Lant "How'd you come out with those black-eyed peas you bought in the spring, Ramrod?"

The man rubbed a large knotty hand over his thin-stranded white hair He turned pale-blue puzzled eyes on Lem His Adam's apple worked up and down in his cylinder neck

"I've done tol' you, Lem," he protested in a high thin squeak "Awy time awybody's in the sto' you ask me 'bout dem peas. I want you should wemembeh and not ask me no mo' It this a way," he turned to Lant, "I bought me fifty pound o' seed peas and I planted half 'Totheh half I put in lard pails and kept 'em to took and eat That's all"

"Did the cooking peas last you until the seed peas grew?" Lem prodded him

"No, they divv out 'fore the peas tome up You wemembeh hit were mighty dwy all spwing Nothin' didn't gwow like it belonged to."

"Did you go hungry, Ramrod, 'til the peas you'd planted, made?"

'I teep tellin' you, I neveh went hongwy The peas in the gwound wa'n't even spwouted and I dest dug me up fo'-five wows and washed 'em in the wiver and I done et 'em"

Lem turned his back and slapped his leg in a soundless mirth The storekeeper chuckled Lant frowned

"I hope I ain't never put to it as clost as that," he said.

"What you want o' me, Lant?" Ramrod asked

'I'll walk with you a piece," he said He disliked Lem "I'll not have him makin' fun o' me for workin' with Ramrod," he thought

Ramrod shared his dislike When they were part way down the trail that led along the river to his small pine shack, the man burst out, 'I don' see how ol' Desus Chwist tould let awy woman hatch and waise such a son-od a bitch!"

Lant guffawed He slapped Ramrod on the shoulder

"Don't you never let nary man tell you you're crazy," he said

Ramrod turned to the youth with a swift mildness

'You tome home and eat wi' me I dot dood beans to took"

"Ramrod, you cain't cook that kind for dinner today You has to soak 'em all night and boil the devil outen 'em the next mornin'"

"I tell you a secwet I put a 'poonful lye—Giant Lye—in the pot, and hit took dem beans soft as gwits by noon"

'Don't never tell that to Lem Posey," Lant cautioned him

'Not me Hit's a secwet"

Lant wondered uneasily if he were bargaining for more than he could handle. Another look at Ramrod's hands,

hanging like great rooted stumps at the ends of powerful arms, reassured him

"You jest the man I want, Ramrod," he said "Is your loggin' to where you kin leave it for a whiles?"

"I dot me enough logs to make one section," he said 'I kin leave 'em in the bushes if ol' Desus Chwist don't find 'em"

"How about you takin' a few weeks with me to raise them good cypress logs is sunk in the swamps and near the landin's, where the Comp'ny goed off and left 'em?"

"You and me waise 'em and waft 'em?"

'Raft 'em to Palatka, was my idee We'd belong to cut enough floaters to carry the sinkers and then crib raft 'em"

Ramrod was excited He stuffed his bag of navy beans inside his shirt and insisted on turning back and rowing down stream with the boy to look the ground over As Lant cut through a channel to one of the shallow swamp creeks, the man hung far over the side of the rowboat to peer into the brown clear water for cut logs

"Yonde' one!"

Wild rose brambles caught at his white hair, but the insane pale eyes kept to their searching He pointed out another

Lant thought, "He ain't so crazy he don't know good solid cypress"

He agreed to Lant's suggestions for the raising A pair of improvised scows with a windlass and a pair of log tongs would do the trick Lant had much of the equipment among his grandfather's oddments. By the time they had swung in and out of half a dozen creeks that paralleled the river, locating large sound logs and laying their plans, the sun had dropped behind the westerly bank. The river began to steam faintly as the chill night air came down.

"You're obliged to come spend the night to the house," Lant said

Ramrod shook his head vigorously Between his cleft palate and his excitement, he made Lant understand that he was nervous in a strange house He had matches and would build a fire at the edge of Otter Landing As for food, he had had breakfast, and one meal a day sufficed him He wanted to be up to start the work well before day He laid a confidential hand on Lant's arm

'I dest bed up in leaves on the gwound like a 'possum beddin' in a twee," he said.

XVII

The raft lay at Otter Landing under the fog of early morning It was tethered at both ends The river current swirled under it and it tugged at its moorings The ten thirty foot sections, joined flexibly, stirred and rippled like the vertebræ of a great snake The fog filled the river from bank to bank, only the palmettos shook their heads free *from its chill dankness. Ramrod was waiting at the* edge of the water He sat motionless on his heels, his arms between his legs, his hands resting ape like on the ground

Lant saw him from the last bend of the hammock trail The low hanging mist rested over the man's head and the white hair was dissolved in it The outline of the crib-raft showed beyond The boy hurried his pace He laid his hand on Ramrod s shoulder The old man started and brought his gaze to him from a far distance

They moved to the raft without speaking Most of the supplies had been loaded the evening before Lant placed the last box in the rowboat tied for towing behind the last section He unfastened the line that held the end of the raft in to the bank Ramrod loosed the line that held the first section and jumped quickly to the oar-bench Lant walked the three hundred feet of raft to the head and pushed his jam hook against a cypress at the water's edge The head swung slowly away from the bank A quiver of movement passed from one section to another, the wing pieces swung pair by pair Ramrod bent to the sweep The current took the raft and delivered it into the long grip of the river Lant shivered with delight

In the fog the *movement was scarcely perceptible.* The

boy thought anxiously that they had started too early The sun had been about to break over the scrub as he had left the house Now he saw that inch by inch the fog lifted The water rushed visibly past the shore The river was straight for several hundred yards When they reached the first curve, the banks were clear of mist for a foot in height Ramrod swung the thirty foot ash pole on its pivot and the head of the raft took the bend neatly The sections followed docilely Within the cribs the great cypress logs lay loosely penned pinned only at the heads

Ramrod dropped to the oar bench and motioned Lant beside him He placed the boy s hands on the long sweep held his vast ones over them Lant felt the river lick at the tip of the pole Ahead the fog seemed impenetrable It lifted just ahead of them, then closed again behind The river, deep and swift and narrow, wound tortuously It flowed to the north but curved sometimes east, sometimes west, and straightened out again As it turned towards the east, shafts of sunlight split the fog The mist rolled on itself, billowed and disintegrated The thin morning sun broke through, tearing the last shreds from the river pinks and asters It lay in warm bands across the boy s shoulders, chilled by the November dawn

He was amazed at Ramrod s silence The old man had been feverishly garrulous through the weeks in which they raised logs from mud and creek beds and made up the raft He had sometimes let go of the windlass rope when a log was half hoisted, waving his hands to tell some mad griev ance Now he sat in an oblivious peace, his pale eyes calm and watchful He hummed a little in a whining minor

Lant knew the river by heart for a few miles below his own landing Shingle Landing Mud Bottom Springs, Saw Grass, Indian Bluff, where he had found the old 45 70 bullet, as big as his thumb, from the Indian wars—he passed them as he would pass folk he knew Today their faces

were a little strange, as though they showed an unsuspected lack of friendliness The steep east bank was a wall to be avoided, and every bend a menace Where the river current whirled under low hanging boughs, or rushed against the shore before it took itself about a curve, the raft too whirled and rushed Where the sweep was insufficient to steer, Lant used the jam hook to keep the head out of the wood

Ramrod had prepared the boy for passing the Lady Slipper The turn was sharper than a right angle, and as they approached, the river debris that floated with them picked up speed If the raft were not snubbed, it would pile up at the turn Lant s heart pounded He walked the raft back to the rowboat, untied it, passed along the side of the raft and received from Ramrod one end of a long rope He rowed to the convex bank to the east and as the head of the raft drew opposite, made half a dozen turns of the rope about a stout cypress The rope tightened and sang The cypress quivered The raft head swung slowly around the bend Lant released the rope slowly, lying back against it as it slipped through his hands The sections rounded the bend

'Just like a ol' snake movin'," he thought

The current returned from its frenzied rush against the far bank and settled again into its steady four miles an hour The raft swayed a little and settled with it Ramrod pulled in the trailing rope-end Lant caught up in the rowboat, fastened it to the rear and boarded the raft Ramrod nodded The boy felt strong and experienced

He remarked wisely, The Lady Slipper's a perfeck scoundrel"

The sun was high The river was red and gold and bronze, for the sweet gums and hickories and maples were in full *autumn colour The cypress needles had turned to* the deep-red of Lant's hair The river water, stained by

cypress and magnolia dissolved the colour in its clear brownness Scarlet berries were thick on the swamp laurel They were reflected in the calmer water along the shore, as though they grew staunchly below the surface

Towards Hog Thief Creek the river straightened for a distance The sun was directly overhead Ramrod put the sweep in the boy s hands He had only to flutter it now and then as a fish-eagle soaring lifts one wing The man stretched his arms and legs He went back to the supplies and brought forward a tin lard pail Piety had packed with ready-cooked food He set it on the boy s knees and took the sweep from him Lant opened the pail and took out biscuits and cornbread from the top Underneath were fried squirrel and white bacon To one side was a bottle of Abner Lantry s new cane syrup Ramrod watched the bucket a little cross-eyed like a hungry dog He hitched close on the oar bench Lant divided the food in equal portions They ate while the raft drifted handling itself There was more than they could eat in the one meal Lant left his uneaten share in the bucket Ramrod turned pieces of squirrel meat over in his hands and put them regretfully in his pockets They dipped river water in their hands and drank deeply The water was cold and had a clean taste of brown leaves

The stream broadened to nearly three hundred feet A few rare white oaks grew close to the water s edge The raft passed close and Lant could see the large acorns The afternoon sun was strong It moulded the jimson weed into towers of red and gold The next time Lant rowed to shore to snub the rafthead, woodbine trailed across him as he passed under overhanging ash saplings Their touch was reassuring The vines were as they had always been The banks were unchanged, after all The job of snubbing went smoothly and the raft took the bend like a string of well handled horses The boy lost the feeling of uneasiness

that had struck him in the chill morning The river was safe and he could handle it

Ramrod gave him the sweep on every straight reach Towards sunset the bends grew frequent and the man took over the steering again Lant drew his long legs into the circle of his arms He was suddenly exhausted He closed his eyes for a moment

He wakened with the river lapping under him, the tethered raft rocking gently Ramrod had tied it up around a curve where the current was deflected and slow The rear was moored on the near side of the bend and the head on the far The sections made two sides of a triangle around the bend The sun was gone and the river lay in shadow The bank beside him was black Live-oaks and magnolias in a patch of hammock loomed monstrous He looked up Ramrod stood over him, his hands hanging at his sides Lant sat up sharply

He asked, 'What we stopped for? I thought you figgered we'd drift both night and day

The man said, You 'bout divv out I been pushin you. You belong to west We dest camp tonight

Lant frowned He was ashamed of going to sleep

Ramrod said, 'You dot to det used to this You young" He waved one hand at Lant's long legs "You gwowin'"

He pushed his hand through his tufted white hair His eyes stared across the dark water He shook his head, trying to clear it of its confusion He reached across his madness into a far past He groped in a torment of remembering

"I been a boy," he said

The raft was under way before sunrise. There was less fog than the morning before The weather was turning warmer The river past Orange Springs Ferry was not so familiar It turned sharply here and flowed almost due

east along the north boundary of the scrub Ramrod pointed out trails to the water's edge that the boy had not known existed Black Hawk Cut-off, the Needle s Eye and the Galloping Reaches—these began to be strange

The south bank flattened There was more swamp and less hammock The river pinks grew in dense masses, piled as high as small trees There were fewer live-oaks and maples, more bulrushes and willows At Turkey foot Land ing a child in a ragged dress watched them pass They lifted their hands to her and called "Hey! but she put half her hand in her mouth and did not answer Rounding the next bend Lant looked back She stood without moving, gazing after them from under shaggy hair

The days went faster for the boy because the north bank was new They drifted day and night He took turns with Ramrod at napping in the day time The weather turned warm, the current slowed, the river was sun shot and sleepy The afternoons were hot Blue johns flapped languidly ahead and vultures did not stir from their roosts The river edge was a bronze mirror

There came a time in mid afternoon when all life seemed suspended The river flowed interminably but as though without advance The boy thought that he had been always in this still, liquid place There was no change There was no memory and no imagining The young male restlessness that had begun to stir along his bones was quiet If Piety and Cleve and Kezzy were really persons, instead of names, they lay drowned behind him Nothing existed but the brown, clear water, flowing in one spot forever Ramrod sat hunched at the oar bench, lunatic, insensate, silent at the sweep The water lettuce whirled slowly around and around, like dancers waltzing in their sleep Lant watched until he drowsed with it, around and around and around

In the night time he was sharply aware of movement. Ramrod insisted that the river current was faster at night.

They had waited for full moon for the trip and the river was as plain as by day Lant liked the swirling progress in the moonlight between the dark banks He felt the same drowsy excitement as when he played his grand father's banjo He could see water turkies and limpkins roosting high in the cypresses Wood-ducks lifted from the coves with a wild rush of wings and herons, disturbed at their slumber, flew ahead of the raft, snow white in the silver brightness Owls quavered from the shore He breathed sparingly, listening to the river sucking at the raft, smelling the rank sweetness of the swamps

On the straight reaches Ramrod seemed to nap at the oar bench, rousing instinctively when the head of the raft swung too close to shore Lant lay on his back, his arms under his head, the soles of his bare feet against the smoothness of cypress, and watched the stars and the sailing moon The trees, the clumps of tall tufted river grass, the shadowy banks, went by in the night like things remembered in a dream The river flowed, a dream between dreams, and they were all one, the boy and the river and the banks

He was conscious of lying immobile, borne resistlessly between two motions The river moved under him and the sky slipped over him Out of the sky appeared the sun and the moon, the stars and the wind, and they had something to do with the earth They made day and night and they made feed time, when the deer and rabbits stirred at the swamp edge, the fish jumped in the river and the owls hooted in the hammock These things, he thought, were concerned with the earth even when they were invisible

Dead River and the Narrows, the Blue Boar and the Blue Sow; Bill Blount's Honey and Turpentine Creek, the raft passed them in the moonlight They went by the old Riverside Landing by daylight Looking up the shallow bank, Lant saw pine saplings massed against the sky He recognised the east scrub, where he and Cleve and Red

and Black had run down the wild cat He wondered if Red would keep everybody out of the yard while he was away The dogs were showing their age Even Black, he thought, was getting cranky

The familiar points of the scrub's boundaries were increasingly strange from the river, the Winding Blades, the Devil s Salad Patch, Davenport, the last landing on the river, he would scarcely have known them The sun was setting The palms reached up tousled heads and caught the glow, red gold among their fronds The spider lilies were ivory washed with thin gold Red hibiscus and the wild Blazing Star flamed richly Almost without warning the river ended Beyond, the broad St John s moved sluggishly northward to the sea, and there were pale orchid water hyacinths on both sides of the raft

They tied up to wait for daylight and cooked supper on shore In the darkness before moonrise there came sounds from a camp of negro fishermen, a mile away across the greater river The blacks were singing Lant thought that he had never heard such sweetness, dark and rich and flowing, like the river through the swamp In the morning they picked up a tow boat for the thirty miles down the St John's to the lumber mills at Palatka

XVIII

CLEVE and Piety were at supper when Lant returned from his raft trip He grinned at them from the doorway and tossed his grandfather s old leather wallet on the kitchen table in front of his mother She opened it and took her eyes from him a moment to make a rough count of the bills

Cleve said, 'Lemme see

Piety said, 'Hit do pay mighty good"

Lant dropped down beside her and poked his grimy fingers in her plate He dipped a piece of sweet potato in the bacon gravy and gulped it down

"Dog take it," he said, I m hongry These is the first white man's rations I ve seed"

'Now you tell me," she said, 'how d you cook and manage?'

You git me filled up, you ll be more like to hear what I got to tell"

He ate from her plate while she heaped another for him

'I got no pie nor puddin'," she said "I wa'n't expectin' you'

Cleve said sulkily between mouthfuls, 'If I'd knowed we was waitin' on Lant to git pie and puddin' on the table, I d of goed to Kezzy for it."

Piety said anxiously, 'I ain't meant to be scarce with sich as that, Cleve" She turned to Lant "We been workin' mighty hard We got two hundred pounds o' meat smokin', and half the sweet pertaters dug before the moon begun to wane"

Cleve said belligerently, "I got 'coon hides salted, most enough to bring as much money as you got"

Lant reached for a pork spare rib

'We 'bout to make us a livin', dogged if we ain't"

The fire in the kitchen range was deeply comforting He sat on the bench beside it while Piety washed the dishes

Put me on a kettle o' water time you're done, Ma It'll take water hot enough to scald a hog to git the stink off me"

'Well, you smell all right to me," she said "I ain't felt too easy, and you on that river"

'I reckon you figger it'll pay to go ahead with the rest o' them logs," Cleve said

"You mighty right"

"That raftin's a man's work," Piety said doubtfully 'Now you tell me about the cookin'"

'The first night and the last un, we done tied up the raft to the bank and cooked on shore 'Tother times we cooked oncet a day on the raft"

"Didn't the water git to the fire?"

"The logs sticks up consid'able"

"Didn't the fire burn the logs?"

"No We piled water lettuce and wet river trash on top and made the fire on top o' that"

"Well, I do know"

Cleve asked, "How'd you git home agin?'

'Rowin' and towin'. We got a tow part way up the St John's and up the Ocklawaha from Riverside to Orange Springs We rowed home from the Ferry"

It was agreed that he would make two more trips with Ramrod while Cleve trapped He would be through in time to trap, too, before spring It was hard to think of the trapping and the farm work and the garden He felt unsteady on his feet, as though the earth were liquid. His

mind moved forward to February and March and April, but the core of his body still drifted on the river

He made the last rafting trip in January The wind was blowing out of a grey north when they set out The uneasiness of atmosphere infected Ramrod He was awkward and nervous and chattered constantly He let go of the sweep to wave his hands Lant took it from him

He asked, 'What all ails you, Ramrod?

The man burst out unintelligibly Lant made out at last that Jesus Christ was after him again Ramrod shrilled in his thin falsetto, 'Dod damn ol' Desus Chwist!' The boy was disturbed

He thought, 'I m like to have a hell of a twist with him"

He did not have Ramrod s sure hand on the sweep He went cold at the narrow margin by which he was keeping the raft head out of the wood Ramrod dropped to his haunches on the raft, swaying from side to side Towards the first bad curve, where the raft must be snubbed, Lant reached back and shook the man by the shoulder

"You got to take the sweep while I git to the bank," he shouted 'If you don t hold the sweep ol Jesus'll shore git the raft"

Ramrod s dull eyes cleared He leaped to his feet and seized the long oar in a frenzy

Snub it, boy! Snub it! We dest fool ol Desus!"

Lant considered tying up the raft at the nearest bend and abandoning the trip But he had seen Ramrod come harmlessly out of his frenzies

He thought, 'I be dogged if I ll quit"

At Indian Bluff it began to rain Large drops fell singly like exhausted bird shot Then they came rapidly, like rats running across a roof Long before they reached Orange Springs Ferry the rain was falling in sheets, a little slantwise across the stream

He asked Ramrod, "You think it ll clare tomorrer?"

The man was a good weather prophet when he was calm He said blankly, "Sho"

The rain stopped at sun-down long enough for them to dry out by a smoky fire on the raft The night was gusty, with spatters of rain that moved swiftly away Ramrod held faithfully to the sweep The boy napped on and off through the night He thought, "I better get my sleep while Ramrod's quiet" In the morning it was plain that a three-day nor'easter had set in They were drenched The wind beat at them through the rain and flattened their clothes against their bones Lant's forelock dripped between his eyes and Ramrod's thin white hair lay like wet fur The man was excited again and Lant took the raft from him and persuaded him to sleep through the afternoon He was calmer when Lant opened a lard pail of cooked food for supper He talked coherently Yet it seemed to the boy that the man quivered with the tautness of a snubbing rope when the raft strained against it Darkness came without a visible sunset The wet greyness of banks and river turned black Wind and rain made a sudden tumult

He shouted, "Ramrod, we got to tie up"

The man began to dance up and down with thin crooked legs

"Teep on! Teep on! Ol' Desus waitin' yondeh by the bank!"

Lant thought despairingly, "Just as good to keep going and be done with it" If the raft piled up, at least the nightmare would be ended

Straining his eyes ahead, he found after a time a luminosity in the very rain, so that the banks showed dark against it Ramrod's sight seemed sharper than his own Again and again the man laid his hand on the boy's arm and pointed to an impending shore line Lant could hear the pines and cypresses threshing their tops The wind whipped

the palmettos and they stirred with the roar of a heavy surf Suddenly Ramrod began to hum The sound was high and whining and vibrant It picked its way in thin threads of madness among the harmonies of the wind The boy felt the hair rise on the back of his neck

Towards midnight a distant thunder and lightning moved close The river was illuminated in broad flashes The storm seemed to be making up stream Lightning struck a hundred yards ahead Then it struck a pine on the right bank so close that splinters fell on the raft The pine blazed a moment before the rain extinguished it Ramrod braced his feet wide apart and threw back his head Water streamed down his neck He shook his fist at the sky

'Shoot some'eres else, Dod damn you," he shrilled 'You a missin' me!

The wind was high the next day but the rain came in intermittent squalls In a lull, Ramrod leaned over the frame of the crib for a drink of water Lant heard him exclaim and turned He was in time to see the upper plate of the man's false teeth eddying down through the dark water Ramrod dissolved in frenzy

'Ol Desus Chwist done it! Ol Desus Chwist have stole my teef!'

Lant shouted, "For God s sake, Ramrod, don't git off this raft!'

Gibbering, the man was clambering in the rowboat and casting loose the line He picked up the oars and rowed with powerful strokes back to the spot of the accident He leaned half out of the boat to peer into the water Straight ahead was the Double S Cut-off River debris and part of an old raft lay heaped at the far side of the turn

Lant thought, 'I just got to pile up, is all"

The current picked up He felt a stir along the line of logs. They would pile up, one on the other, with the power

of elephants Ramrod was rowing up stream again Lant ran the length of the sections and picked up the snubbing rope fastened at the end He gauged the increase in current and his distance from the left bank He dropped into the river and struck out with the knotted end of the line in his teeth He swam like an otter Close to the bank a clump of elder boughs brushed the water He slid under them, feeling for bottom with his naked feet It was not there There was, instead, a terrifying world of water, and he could neither see nor breathe The raft tail, swinging, had tightened on the line The knot had brought him up short, pulled him under He held on, fighting for the top In his panic he thought, this was the way a trout felt on a line

He could let go It was all hopeless Come to the top and let the raft pile to blazes In an instant more he would burst wide open The raft swung again The line slacked and he shot clear The air was a thick red He could not see the stump on shore He felt its staunchness and passed his line around it, once, twice, half a dozen times He dropped slowly forward across it and felt the tightness of the hemp under his lean belly He opened his eyes with Ramrod standing over him, twisting his hands Lant wanted to curse, but he was too tired to open his mouth

Ramrod said, "Minute I done lef you, ol Desus Chwist slip up on you I won t leave you no mo' "

Lant sat up His sight cleared He spat river water The moorings held, he noticed The head of the raft was in mid stream, but the rear tugged futilely, like a 'possum caught by the tail Ramrod lifted the boy to his feet and bent anxiously to wring the water from the torn legs of his overalls He would take the boat, he said, and snub the raft head at the right bank When his line was fast, Lant could free the end and get aboard The man's mind

worked clearly He was mild and chastened He went at his job with a painful concentration

The skies cleared and the wind blew cold on the fourth day They dried out in the raw sunshine Lant thought he would never be warm again Because the weather had been threatening he had brought an extra supply of cooked food It was all gone He laid a fire on a pile of rubbish on the raft and opened the twenty pound lard pail for meal to fry cornbread The cover had been ajar through the storm and the supplies were ruined Meal and coffee and sugar were inextricably blended wet and rank and moulded Only the grits in a separate tin can were dry and usable He boiled a cupful They ate unsalted grits for dinner in silence

Lant took his light rifle from under the oar-bench and wiped off the moisture He watched the banks sharply for a shot The ducks were in safe coves and the squirrels would not stir in the high wind A possum, come to the river s edge to drink, would be acceptable meat Ramrod waved wildly towards a water turkey in a cypress Lant shook his head

They ain t fitten he said

Limpkin would have to be the dish The brown spotted cranes were plentiful and were an easy shot The man and boy ate limpkin boiled with grits three times a day the rest of the way to Palatka Lant felt unhappily that the river had betrayed him It was a bad matter when there was treachery in familiar things

Piety was startled the day that he walked in from the scrub road at noon He was gaunt and tattered and there were hollows under his eyes

She asked, Why you comin' in from the road?

" Cause the rowboat sprung a leak at Davenport."

"You and the ol' man walked all that way?"

'We walked it"

"Whyn't you bring the pore ol' feller in?"

"Ain't no gittin' him under a roof"

He fished the wallet from his shirt and handed it to her.

'They cut the price this time I ain't sorry it's the end o' the cypress If I got to starve to death, I'd like to starve to death rested"

He went into his bedroom and took off his overalls and dropped into bed Piety worked quietly through the after noon while he slept She was glad he was through with rafting She had no fear for him from the scrub He could travel on foot from one end to the other and no danger, whether of rattler or panther or bear, was quicker than he. No storm could confuse him, no darkness cause him to lose his way But all the time he was on the river, she thought of him She thought of him borne helpless on a strong flowing thing

She cooked an early hearty supper and when she heard him stir shortly before sunset, she sent Red and Black into the house to him She heard the old dogs whining with ecstasy, patting their tails on the floor of his room He bathed and put on clean clothes and sat by the hearth fire in the front room in the late winter afternoon and told her of the trip and the storm and Ramrod's madness She sat rocking gently, watching him as though the sight of him fed a hunger

He asked, "Where's Cleve?"

"He goed acrost the river to see about work He says he's got to have work, when the trappin's done He figgered he could git him a job cuttin' ties And board with Abner."

"Gittin' right peert, ain't he?"

She laughed

"I reckon he's got a reason"

She left him and went to the kitchen She called him.

"Supper's done."

He sat down at the kitchen table She brought out from the oven a large bird, roasted to a golden brown, exuding a stuffing odorous of sage and onion He dropped the steel knife and fork with a clatter

Ma, what s that?'

'Limpkin," she said proudly 'Cleve caught it accidental in a trap"

'Git me somethin' else quick I've got a bait o' them squallin' fellers I ve et 'em to where they was purely squallin' in my belly I got no more use for 'em except to hear 'em holler when the cold's done or a rain's a-comin'"

After supper he said, "I better go on down to Uncle Zeke's to see kin I quarrel with Kezzy She seed me go by this mornin', but I was too give out to stop"

He had scarcely gone, she thought, before he was back The breezeway was still lighted by the bright west He was scowling and scuffling the sand ahead of him with his feet

"Wa n't Kezzy there?'

He spat across the steps in disgust

'Oh, yes. Her and Cleve too Great God!'

'Now what s the matter? she asked impatiently

'Nothin', if it suits Kezzy Cleve's courtin—I reckon you'd call it courtin' He had his damn nose in the back of her neck like a cat chompin' on a rat."

The woman chuckled

'You shore Kezzy didn t need no he'p?'

'I figgered at first she were tryin' to git loose." He spat again Kezzy's strong as Cleve She could of pitched him outen the yard if she'd took the notion I come off before they seed me"

He brushed past her, into the front room His face startled her She followed him

She said hesitantly, "Hit's hard for me to think you're so near growed."

She braced her small frame and came out with the question bluntly.

"Lant! You want Kezzy?"

A hot flush darkened his face in the twilight.

"Hell," he said, "I don't want no damn girl."

XIX

A SLOW breeze stirred across the April night The moonlight washed through the clearing in waves of warm silver Kezzy sat with Piety and Lant on the front stoop

She said, 'I kin smell the white oleander bloomin' by the gate"

Piety said, 'Things is mighty sweet on a warm night I kin smell ploughed ground back yonder '

"How's the new mule?" Kezzy asked

"He ain't as smart as the old un, Piety said, 'but likely he ain't learned my ways Lant, don't you shoot that gun in the night this-a way '

"I ain't fixin' to shoot I'm jest sightin' it"

He lifted his new 30-30 Winchester rifle to his shoulder, down and up again It had an ivory sight that caught the moonlight He laid the gun across his sharp knees and drew an appraising hand along its smooth length

"I kin knock hell outen a deer with this, most as far as I kin see him"

Kezzy asked, 'What were the matter with your old gun?"

"Nary thing," Piety said 'He jest had the money when him and Cleve divided after their trappin' and he couldn't git to the catalogue quick enough"

'You done the same thing with the mule," he argued 'He'd done been eatin' his head off and doin' no work, but when you put him to the plow the one day and he dropped dead in the traces, you takened on like 'twas me was dead"

He nudged Kezzy and waited for his mother's wrath.

'The gun and the mule wa'n't the same thing' she shrilled 'I uses a mule to make us rations Your ol gun were plenty good You kin shoot with a old style gun, but you shore cain't plough with a dead mule"

"Ne' mind, Ma,' he said, "you got the new mule and I got the gun"

'That's jest about all we got, too I declare, Kezzy, seems jest lately like him and Cleve has done swopped natures Cleve workin' for Ab acrost the river, and Lant a settin' and puttin' out the last o' the cash money for a rifle And the house full o' guns,' she added

"Ma, you jest gittin' cranky Listen!"

In the near by hammock a whip poor will sounded his tumultuous cry, tearing the still night

'That's jest the feller I been waitin' for,' he said

Piety said uncertainly, "If you been waitin' on somethin', why'n t you say?'

"'Cause I perfeckly enjoys tormentin' you, he said

Kezzy slapped at her legs

'I don't know what the first whip poor will mean to you, Lant, but dogged if it don't mean the first skeeters to me'

She stood up

"I got to be goin' Zeke ll think I'm spendin' the night Ary one keer to walk the road with me?"

Piety said, 'We'll both go Seem like we're wakeful, first warm weather"

They strolled together the half mile of scrub road to Zeke's land Kezzy walked between Lant and Piety, linking her arms in theirs The sand road showed brighter by moonlight than by sun A squirrel ran across in front of them From the river there came the roar of a bull alligator

Lant said, "I figgered you belonged to stick your snout outen the water 'bout now Beller, you scaper, go on and

beller Ma, you got so short o' patience—how many 'gators have you heerd?"

"That's the first"

"Uh huh And how did you reckon I'd go 'gatorin', when they wa'n't no 'gators out?"

'If you was aimin' to 'gator," she said indignantly, "you should have said"

"'Twouldn't hurry the 'gators none to say"

Kezzy said, 'I been wonderin' if twa'n't about time for 'em I been wonderin', too, why 'tis they don't never come out 'til the nights gits warm"

"Because spring and summer's their matin' season And matin' season, hit s jest the nature of the creeters to pop up"

She laughed and looked up into his face

'Now listen who's talkin' about matin' What do you know 'bout 'gators matin?'

"I know all about it,' he said earnestly

Piety said, "You've seed their nestes on top o' tussocks, ain't you, Kezzy?'

"Lant dug into one oncet to show me Down near the Dread Sixteen eggs, wa n't it, Lant? And them all covered with the biggest mess o' rotten leaves and river trash When Lant put my hand down in to feel, it were hot as if a settin' hen had jest left the nest Lant, what you fixin' to hunt 'em for? You after the live uns or the hides?'

"The hides o' big uns and very small uns alive."

"What they worth?"

"Four and a half for seven foot hides and over. A quarter apiece for small live uns"

"If the price holds up"

"You mighty right Trouble with this country, the word goes out they's money in a thing, and the hull mess lays in and works that thing They got the price o' skins down to where winter trappin' don't scarcely pay."

They stopped at Zeke's gate.

Kezzy said, "Much obliged for bringin' me home Aunt Py tee, if this long-coupled young un o' yours needs he'p pullin' out 'gator teeth, leave me know"

The bull 'gator roared again as Lant and Piety walked home together The boy was preoccupied and did not notice that his long double jointed stride was taking him ahead of her He missed her and looked back to see her floundering in the sand He waited for her and took her hand in his

'Pore Py tee, he said, "gittin' so old and slow she has to git drug along '

He pulled her behind him

'Like towin' a extry rowboat," he said

She laughed She was surprised to find the walking now so comfortable

The next day was warm Humming birds darted at the coral honeysuckle on the fence

Piety said, "The June birds is early

Lant spent the morning putting his 'gatoring equipment in order He cleaned and filled his bull's-eye lantern that had replaced the fire pan for night hunting, loaded his new rifle and sharpened the point of his harpoon He longed to be on the river, but the alligators were too wary to be hunted in the day-time A boat slipping down the current could come almost within gunshot of the creatures sunning on logs or mud bathing in a 'gator wallow, but at the crucial instant they slid into the water

He ate his supper at five o'clock in order to be on the creeks with the first dark He went down the hammock ledge with the sinking sun and sat in the boat at the swamp landing until the dark vegetation, the cypresses and the water had absorbed the last of the twilight. He poled silently out of the swamp and into Catfish Creek Such a night should bring out the old male that had been stripping his bass and catfish lines

The boat moved without sound Now and then the pole made a gurgling as it dipped as though a bass had leaped Rounding a sharp turn in the creek, the low hanging boughs of a blue bay scraped the gunwhales The rustling was no more than the brushing of boughs across a floating log

Ahead of him the creek narrowed to little more than the boat's width The circle of light from the bull s-eye lantern in the bow, covered the water To the right, low under a bank, appeared the tell tale twin glow of a 'gator's eyes They shone unblinking like red hot coals He poled towards them and they were gone He was sure the 'gator had not submerged He backed up to his original position The twin coals met his light Six inches of movement in any direction wiped them out He was too far for a shot, he thought, but when he next flashed the red eyes, he fired There was a muffled thumping He approached cautiously A five foot 'gator lay dying inside a hollow log He was disappointed in the animal s size. Above his regret surged a joy in the new rifle He ran his hand down the barrel, faintly warm from the shot

'I jest figgered you belonged to be a killin' thing,' he said

When the creature stopped thrashing about, he dragged it into the boat He was anxious to be moving along and paid it no further attention A few minutes later the boat was a tumult of motion The 'gator had come to its senses and was snapping its jaws and flailing the boat with its scorpion-quick tail Lant lifted his feet out of its way and exchanged pole for rifle He dared not shoot indiscriminately for fear of sinking the boat When, in the blackness, he made out the head against the side as the 'gator reared to go overboard, he fired again It sank back

"I d forgot you bastards was that hard to kill," he told it 'Next time I bring my cane knife," he added to himself

He followed the network of false channels that honeycombed the swamp between mainland and river He knew a 'gator cave where False Catfish all but met the river He swung towards it Over the deep pool he called up the young alligators by grunting, imitating their sound They swarmed up from the cave, milling like minnows He scooped them in with his hands A broad nose lifted itself The female had risen to fight Lant pushed the flat head under with his harpoon

"Git down there, damn you, and send me up your babies '

He scooped in a handful more, and the female charged the boat He heard the jaws meet near the side and the powerful tail churned the water She was something under the desired seven feet and he decided to pass up the shot The greatest danger in 'gatoring was from infuriated females He poled rapidly away

The young alligators swarmed in the boat The sides were high and they reared helplessly One lay across his feet He could not see in the blackness behind the lantern, but he felt the lift of the small thing's breathing In the main channel of the creek again he was aware of a faint luminosity The moon had risen He might as well go home The lantern light was no match for the silver translucence that washed through the swamp

At the swamp landing he dragged the grown 'gator on shore to skin by daylight He turned his lantern on the young ones in the boat They lay clustered and motionless, blinking evil eyes He picked them up with a hand closed

[illegible]

the clearing

Through the summer the 'gatoring proved more profitable than the winter's trapping Lant met Cleve at Kezzy's

in June and suggested that his cousin join him Cleve shook his pale head and grinned, showing his gums

'Don't you fret about me and the 'gatorin'," he said. 'Wilsons and Saunders has wanted I should go with 'em Not me"

"'Tain't no risk to it"

'Don't tell me How come Nub-footed Turner lost half his foot if they ain't no risk?'

'He were jest keerless"

"I might git keerless, too I m ridin' range for Uncle Ab and savin' a dollar two a week I aim to keep away from 'gators right on"

Towards the end of the summer the larger saurians were seldom seen The females prepared for the September hatching of the eggs, laid in the spring, and hunted winter quarters They were already holing up here and there in deep watery caves in swamp and river bed They had been decimated by the spring and summer hunting The remaining adults added an acquired wariness to an instinctive one.

Lant poled into the main current of the river for his last night s hunt of the season He had never seen an alligator at the mouth of Taylor s Dread He was not expecting to shine a pair of eyes there The double coals caught him unawares They shone so wide apart he could not believe what he saw He sculled quickly and noiselessly across the river and lifted his rifle His ivory sight glinted between the twin fixed fires He followed his shot immediately with the harpoon He poled the boat forward madly

'Bless Katy," he said to himself, 'I got me the granddaddy o' the hull bunch"

The 'gator was rolling with the harpoon The line twisted in his hands so fast it burned them. But the great creature was dying Its struggles grew spasmodic. It lunged

and lifted itself on the muddy bank It whipped its tail and was still Lant leaned over the side of the boat The head and jaws, flat on the mud, were three feet in length He dragged at the fore feet and shoulders and chopped twice through the backbone with his machete like cane knife

'I ll not have you comin' to life in the boat," he promised it 'I aim to have you dead good '

He thought at times he would never be able to get the animal in the boat alone The mud bank was level with the gunwhales of the boat He tugged and pulled at the great carcass He lit a cigarette and rested His strength at seventeen was manlike, but it came in explosions and exhausted itself He pulled again He felt his muscles quiver and refuse to hold He cursed He rested and tried again

"You stinkin' bastard, I ll not leave go——'

He sobbed and held on A few inches at a time, he heaved the body across the gunwhales and into the boat The big bull was all of twenty feet. The tail hung over the end He paddled up the river, home He left the gator in the boat, mooring it high among cypress knees He stumbled through the dark hammock, panting, into his bed

In the morning he went for Zeke to help him handle the carcass Kezzy and Piety followed They sat on their heels in the swamp and watched the skinning and trimming

Lant said, Kezzy, I ll make you a pencil holder like mine outen this feller's skull See where them ivory tushes comes from the bottom jaw and thu them openin's in the top? Them openin's, and the eye sockets, time the bone's cleaned and bleached, makes purely handy pockets for pencils and files and sich"

"I d jest be mighty proud to have it"

The belly of the beast was bulging and Lant began to cut it open to see what it contained Frogs, fish and cooters he

had found the usual fare, with, in the larger animals, deer and hog meat. Most of them had lighter'd knots in their stomachs Piety edged in close.

'Ma wants to see kin she find one o' them missin' hogs o' hers," Lant said

Zeke said, "He's jest about the feller to git 'em, too, comin' to the water's edge to drink"

The stomach fell open It held much meat and an astonishing assortment of undigested antiquities, wood and bones and a recognisable shoe

Lant said, "It's a pity Cleve ain't here He d swear that shoe belonged to Nub footed Turner"

Kezzy poked about the saurian's head She discovered two of the six musk spots, exuding a pungent matter like the yolk of an egg

"Why you reckon he have that musk, Lant?' she asked

"I dunno," he said, 'lest it is to make him stink like a damn alligator"

XX

Piety and Kezzy leaned over the edge of the hog run on an afternoon in a late November Kezzy was waiting for Lant to come back from a trip to the Eureka post-office.

Piety said, "He's expectin' a catalogue will give the new fur prices He says he's got a idee this'll be the last winter they'll be a livin' trappin'"

"*Prices pore, eh?*"

"Prices nothin' extry and the varmints ain't too plentiful now, neither The men's been trappin' both sides the river so long they 'bout to git 'em cleaned out Lant says hit'll be a good thing if they ain't a livin' in it for a whiles Folkses'll quit trappin' and the creeters'll git a chancet to breed agin The same with the 'gatorin'"

"He do figger things out, don't he? He's got a good head on him for sich a young feller"

"He's nineteen,' Piety said

"Cleve and me's twenty-one Seem now like we're standin' still and Lant's ketchin' up to us"

Piety said, 'I ain't standin' still A day's ploughin' near puts me in the bed"

"You'd ought to quit sich work Leave Lant do it"

"He do the heavy part, when I kin ketch him before he's gone to the woods or river He says the land ain't worth foolin' with no more"

"You know he's right, Aunt Py-tee You cain't make you no money-crop on fields has been worked as long as these. How long's it been?"

"'Bout thirty five years"

The young woman leaned over the run and scratched a sow's back with a corn-cob

"Aunt Py tee,' she said, Cleve s takin' on somethin' turrible for me to marry him

Piety said, 'I like Cleve

Kezzy said, 'The pore feller's worked right faithful, tryin' to save a leetle somethin'

The hogs grunted at the trough, guzzling in the table scraps and dishwater

Kezzy said tenderly, 'They do love slop

She leaned her round arms on the fence top and looked out over the scrub

'I got two things agin it, she said I hates to leave Zeke He's been a good ol thing' The black eyes clouded "And don't seem like I kin bear to leave the scrub'

Piety said, Cleve's doin' nothin' he cain't quit Why don t he come back and farm and raise hogs and sich and you and Zeke and him all live together?

'Him and Zeke don t someways git along"

'I don't blame you then 'Tain't no pleasure to live where folkses is quarrellin'

She could not help being glad that something was keeping Kezzy in the scrub

Kezzy said, "A nigger woman to Ft McCoy done tole me if you burns your onion skins n the stove it ll keep quarrellin' outen the house Sho, I burnt me the biggest mess, and Zeke like to run Cleve off the place that very day"

She hesitated

She said, 'Aunt Py-tee, I reckon you're proud Lant ain't brought hisself home a wife yit"

The older woman pondered

"No," she said, 'I ll be proud to see him marry I gits lonesome, Kezzy He ain't to the house much"

"I reckon you do git lonesome"

"But not him I declare, Kezzy, he don't know what 'tis to be lonesome"

Kezzy said, "But he's a lonely kind of a feller, too"

"He's lonely, in a way o' speakin'. He goes off by hisself, huntin' Or sets studyin'"

Kezzy said, "I reckon Cleve and me had orter been takin' him to the breakdowns with us Gittin' him a girl to make him more sociable, mebbe You reckon he'd like a girl?"

Her eyes were fixed on the pine tops across the road Above them an opaque moon, nearly full, rode thin against the blue of the late afternoon

Piety put her hand over her mouth, searching her memory

'*Last time I said ary thing—what was it he said—said* he didn't want no damn girl That was it'

Kezzy did not speak After a minute the woman looked at her curiously The girl was trembling

Piety asked, 'You cold, Kezzy?"

The girl pressed her lips tightly together She drew a deep breath She closed her eyes

She said in a strained voice, 'I reckon so"

She turned abruptly to the hogs

'I thought that pieded sow found six pigs She ain't got but three"

"She did" Piety ruffled with enthusiasm Her small voice grew high 'She found six pigs and lost three in the scrub Jest lost 'em Or else the Half breed got 'em *My* boars strays so fur into the scrub he's been trappin' 'em and changin' their marks One come home with a fresh mark in his ear A perfeckly fresh mark! I know that's where my ol' male hog goed to"

Kezzy said, "Your barrows is nice and fat. You butcherin' on this moon?"

"We got to let it go Next week'd jest suit us, but the moon'll be wanin' then"

"No use to butcher on a wanin' moon The meat jest shrivels in the fryin' pan Quare, the way the moon do things, ain't it?

"Hit's quare about the meat shrinkin' 'Tain't so quare about the crops Plantin' root crops, like onions and 'taters, when the nights is dark, makes sense Plantin' top crops between new moon and full, that makes sense. The moon draws the leaves outen the ground, same as the sun"

"Hit don't make sense makin' soap on the full moon nor pickin' sage leaves, Kezzy said Pickin' sage leaves re minds me—you got to give me some more plants Them others died, and I toted water and toted water"

"Sage plants is mighty pertickler My ma used to say the tech o' some people were poison to 'em A woman person, special, belongs to be keerful A woman in the family way'll kill sage, techin' it"

Kezzy burst out laughing

"Now Aunt Py tee, that wa'n't my trouble."

"I'm jest tellin' you Kezzy, they's somethin' quare to ever'thing Bill Lewis says now persimmon trees grows from grub-worms"

"They don't no sich thing They grows from persimmon seeds"

"That's what I always figgered"

She wanted to do justice to Bill Lewis.

"But mebbe now he knows"

The two leaned over the fence, the small thin woman and the big-boned young one, the greying head close to the smooth black one. Lant saw them before they heard his tread

"Cain't you two talk about nothin' but hogs?" he called

They turned. Kezzy was taken unawares by his height each time she saw him Until the past year he had been

little taller than she Now he was stretched out as long, Piety said, as his grandfather. He was double jointed and gangling His hands and feet hung like attached false pieces outside his Sunday suit, bought two years before with money from his rafting Kezzy's eyes softened at the sight of him She caught her lip between her teeth.

She said lightly, "Hogs is jest about it, Mister. We been talkin' about you"

He guffawed and reached across his mother to pull at the girl's sleek hair.

"Come on in the house," he invited her, "if you're visitin'. It's cold I like to froze to death comin' down the river"

"What about hides?" she asked

"Nothin' extry"

"Did you see Cleve at Eureka?"

"I seed him comin' in from Uncle Ab's He said tell you he'd be over soon in the mornin' to he'p you and Zeke with the beef butcherin'"

"That's what I come to see you about, Lant. How 'bout you goin' with us in the mornin' to find the cattle? If them scapers ain't jest this side the Ferry, I won't know where to look for 'em Zeke nor Cleve neither one can't track no better'n a jay-bird"

"Hit mought take a sweet pertater pie to toll me away from my traps"

"Leave me go on home then and make you one You got the biggest belly for sich a gank-gutted creeter."

"Ma won't make me no 'tater pie. Somebody got to do it"

"I'll have your pie. If Cleve don't show up so hongry he cleans out the house."

Lant and Cleve, Zeke and Kezzy set out before daylight to find Zeke's herd. They rode in Zeke's spring wagon, drawn by Lant's grey mule. Red and Black followed under

the wheels The cattle had been last seen in the scrub between Orange Springs Ferry and Cedar Landing In mid morning they located them far beyond, near River side Lant offered to drive them in but Kezzy refused

'You all go on," she said, 'and leave me the dogs and Lant's rifle, and I ll cut the cattle in towards home the very easiest They drive good for me, you know that, Zeke."

Cleve said, 'If you won't leave Lant drive 'em, I ll stay with you, Kezzy"

'I don't want you"

He grinned at her

'You skeert o me, Kezzy?"

'No, I ain't skeert o you You or no man," she said hotly 'You ll find it out, does we r'aly marry"

Zeke said, 'Best leave Lant bring 'em in'

She said, 'Lant s got his traps to visit He ll have the half of 'em empty now, and him so late You all go on now Me and the cattle ll be in ahead of you

The animals were already grazing towards the south west, pulling off the ripening palmetto berries from the low stalks Kezzy had brought home the herd half a dozen times She would be all right, and she liked to have her way The men left her, laughing at her They watched her strike out firmly in a diagonal line across the scrub

Zeke said, 'She shore is a sight. Jest like her Aunt Annie Jest like her"

The men reached home in early afternoon The day wore on to sunset Lant had gone on to his traps Cleve had stopped off with Zeke. Kezzy and the herd were not within hearing at dusk. Soon after dark the cattle came in Zeke and Cleve heard them in the swamp, stamping and lowing Kezzy did not come. At midnight Lant and Piety were awakened Cleve was calling from the yard.

"Lant! Aunt Py tee! Git up! Kezzy's lost in the scrub '

Lant drew on overalls over his undersuit and did not stop for a shirt Piety could not find her drawers in the dark and dressed herself in her muslin shift and the soiled dress of the day She felt her way to the kitchen and groped for a plate of cold cornbread and chicken to take with her She joined Lant

She said, 'I kin find your Pa's compass in the trunk'

'I don't need no compass ' He hesitated "Better git it"

He lit a kerosene lamp and held it while she lifted the round lid of the small trunk at the foot of her bed She lifted aside Lant s banjo, her treasures of a white tablecloth, her hat, and small personal trifles that had belonged to her father and her husband

'Here 'tis"

She handed him Willy's compass

Cleve called, 'Ain t you comin ?

'We're done We re comin'"

The three walked down the dark road together Piety scolded both of them all the way She broke out freshly when Zeke met them at the gate

"None of you had no business leavin' her She don't know the scrub good enough to strike through alone"

Zeke said, 'I thought she done so, Py tee, or I wouldn't of left her"

Cleve said, 'I wanted to stay, but she wouldn't have it I wouldn't of been no good to her I don't know north from south time the sky cloud over"

Lant said, "I was the one to stay"

His mouth was white He could picture, as they could not, the immensity of the scrub, rolling mile on mile without water or human habitation Kezzy could wander in circles, as lost folk did, until she dropped

He asked, "Ary one know, did she have matches?"

No one knew

Piety said, 'She'll git the pneumony, if she's got no fire tonight"

Zeke was nervous and helpless The drake's-tails in his neck trembled as he breathed Piety went into Kezzy's kitchen, started a fire in the wood range and cooked hot food Cleve wandered in and she put him at wrapping *food in two parcels, a large one for themselves and a* smaller one for Kezzy He filled a quart Mason jar with water Piety wrapped it in a flour sacking towel, thinking that if they found Kezzy hurt, it would do to tear up for bandages Lant came to hurry her They sat in the kitchen by the light of a lamp and ate a quick meal

There was nothing to do but take the road again to the spot where Kezzy had first struck into the scrub Every quarter of a mile Lant blew a long blast on his hunting horn There was never any answer Once Cleve thought he heard a cry and they stopped the wagon to listen Lant blew again and again, but they heard nothing more. Then, far in the distance, they heard a wailing scream come out of the darkness

Cleve said breathlessly, "Panther!

Lant said in irritation, 'Them things is cowards They ain't never attacked nothin' but leetle ol young uns."

But they were uneasy They thought of the panther all the way Piety remarked miles later, "Them things cries jest like a crazy woman,' and Zeke said at once, "Ain t it so!"

At daylight they reached the spot where they had left Kezzy The tramped hoof marks of the cattle were here and where they straightened out again in single and double file, Kezzy's square foot prints were discernible among them The sun rose in a thin red streak and was imme diately dissolved in grey A mist sifted through the air, fine and sharp as myriads of broken needle points.

Lant said, "I don't keer for this ol' otter-drizzle."

Cleve asked, 'Why not?'

Lant glared at him

"My God, if it comes on to rain, hit ll wash out Kezzy's tracks and they'll be no trailin' of her at all'

He strode into the scrub, following the foot prints, his head swinging from side to side on his long neck

He called back, 'Ma, you drive the wagon towards home agin Rale slow now

I want to come,' she shrilled defiantly

'Come on, then Somebody drive back, so's I ll know about where to come up with the wagon'

I ll go on with the wagon, Py tee,' Zeke offered, "if you wants to foller I m all of a tremble, no sleep and all I ain t good as you for this scrub travellin'"

She set out after Lant and Cleve The scrub oaks were higher than her head, so that the twigs caught her hair and the acorns scratched her lifted arms She pushed through doggedly Her long skirt wrapped around her legs It caught in the vines and bushes She would have pinned it about her waist, as she sometimes did in a wet field, except that it gave some protection against the barbed edges of the scrub palmettos

As they continued the trail, it became plain that the cattle had cut widely to the east and south before turning towards the river Lant began to shoot every few minutes. As the reverberations died away through the close-crowded pines, all three stood still to listen When they had worked their way three or four miles into the scrub they came on Kezzy's camp-fire It had been put out with sand and a wisp of smoke still wavered from it Lant touched it with his toe

He said excitedly, 'She ain't been long gone from here.'

Lant shot, and Kezzy's rifle answered them They shouted and she shouted back They came to her grinning

broadly with a sudden lightness of mind She was sound and fresh Her dark eyes seemed new-opened from sleep

"You scapers," she laughed, "come a lookin' for me! You got water?"

Cleve handed her the quart jar and she drank half of it, then held the jar at an angle so that Red and Black might lap their share The old dogs bounded against Lant

Cleve said, "You be biggety agin, Miss Kezzy When did you know you was lost?'

"Lost?' She looked at him, astonished. "I wa'n't losted I seed I couldn't foller the cattle in before night, so I figgered it was better to spend the night a sleepin' than a-travelin' I slep' back yonder, agin a pine tree I had me a good fire and me and the dogs bunched up together'

Cleve did not believe her

'Nobody couldn't sleep, out here in the scrub alone," he said

"Jest 'cause you see scare-boogers," she taunted him "don't mean nothin' They's nary thing here to harm a body'

"All right," he said angrily, 'if you wa'n't losted, where's the river at?"

She pointed

"Yonder 'tis You cut right acrost yonder, you'll come out on the road about Thad Lantry's ol' place Ain't that right, Lant?"

The boy said, 'That's right"

Cleve said sullenly, 'We-all wasted our time, then, set tin' up for you and comin' out to hunt you 'fore crack o' day"

The girl said gently, 'I'm plumb sorry you all set up for me I figgered shore you'd know what hilt me back Did I worry you, Cleve?"

"You worried me"

She linked her arm in his and handed him the rifle to carry

"Don't you never worry about me agin," she said "I ain't the kind needs worryin' over"

Piety said stoutly, "You worried me, too We was all worried I been losted in the scrub, Kezzy, and I know what 'tis'

'You been losted?"

"I mean I kin tell my way purty good when the sun shines But now come a cloudy day, I'm losted This were a cloudy day, and I goed into the scrub to pull acorns for the hogs I got my apron full and when I turned around I couldn't tell north from south nor east from west I feared to wander, so I jest set there I knowed when Lant found dinner missin' and me gone too, he'd hunt me."

Kezzy laughed

"What was she doin' when you found her, Lant?'

He slapped his mother's thin shoulder and chuckled

"She were jest a settin' there, lookin' big-eyed and skeert, like a leetle ol' scrooch-owl on a limb in the day time."

They were all in high spirits, but they stopped talking and hurried their pace as best they could through the undergrowth They wanted to cut off Zeke and the wagon as soon as possible Here and there the match thin crowded pines gave way to a stretch of open scrub, with large pines and a smooth floor They could make as good time across it as on a road

Lant said over his shoulder, "Here's the kind of a place I like to ketch me a big buck in'

Cleve said amiably, "Me too"

Lant explained to Kezzy, "A buck'll make for sich as this, for he cain't go it thu the low thick bush the way a doe kin He's got them horns to look out for"

They caught up with the wagon near Thad's deserted clearing Kezzy was the only one who was not tired.

They jogged drowsily down the road, eating the food from the paper parcels

Kezzy repeated, with her mouth full of biscuit, "I shore would of made it on in last night if I d studied you'd of took on about it"

Cleve said, "Aunt Py tee, don't it jest show she'd orter marry me and quit sich foolishness?"

Zeke said drily, 'You cain't do nothin' with her now—don't never figger you kin do more with a woman when you git her You kin gentle a wild hog and a raccoon and a possum and a wild horse I even knowed a feller had a rattlesnake in a barrel He claimed hit knowed him and wouldn't strike But don't git nary idee you kin gentle a woman has got no mind to be gentled"

Kezzy said, "You all talk like I was a pole-cat in a pen"

"I'll say it to your face, Kezzy,' Piety said loyally, "you're perfeckly clever and a man couldn't git him no better wife"

The girl said gravely, 'I would be good to a man, Aunt Py tee"

They were at Zeke's clearing

"I'm fixin' to git me a piece o' sleep," he said, "now I know Kezzy ain't to bury But you-all come in, if you will"

'No," Piety said, "my hogs and chickens ain't been fed and they'll be a rarin' How 'bout you goin' on home with me and stayin' all night, Kezzy?"

"If Zeke's fixin' to sleep, I jest as good to go visitin'"

'You take the wagon, then," Zeke said.

Piety asked politely, "How 'bout you, Cleve? You come go, too"

"I cain't git along thouten my sleep," he said. "I'll go on in with Zeke and lay down Mought be we'll butcher soon in the mornin', one o' them beeves give us all the

trouble Time Kezzy gits back tomorrer, she kin begin to fry down meat"

Zeke and Cleve waved to them from the door as the wagon creaked down the road

"Save me the liver," Piety called back to Zeke

Kezzy asked, 'Kin I go with you to your traps, Lant?'

'Shore kin, if you'll promise to pick out all the pole-cats"

"They cain't smell no worse dead than alive"

"Nary a mite, but the fun begin when they ain't dead good"

"Don't you let him git you into no mess, Kezzy," Piety told her

Kezzy unhitched the mule and led it to the shed while Lant backed the wagon against the fence Red and Black dropped down in the sun Piety went into the house A large yellow cat bounded from under the steps, greeting her with loud yodels The woman called across the yard

'The cat's back agin!"

"The ring tailed bastard always do come back," Lant said "Dogged if I'd give him yard room, the way he goes off Clear to Eureka," he explained to Kezzy

'Pore feller," she said "Have to go so fur to do his courtin'"

Lant said impudently, "'Tain't no further than Cleve come to court you"

"Shut your mouth!"

She cuffed his big ears and he guffawed

Piety took the cat in her thin arms She talked to him in a high mincing tone that he understood He closed his green eyes in ecstasy and butted his head against her ribs.

She called, "Must I cook before you go off?"

"You cook, and you and that yaller jay-bird go ahead and eat Me and Kezzy'll eat when we comes in. Longer I waits, the more 'coons'll be gnawed out"

He went ahead down the narrow trail that led *across*

the clearing and down the hammock ledge to the swamp He carried his cane knife, as big as a machete Wherever a thorny vine or new sprouted sapling was in the way, he slashed at it as he walked, keeping the trail open

The first half dozen of his traps had been empty Now they approached what Cleve called 'Lant's 'possum log," for he could almost count on a daily trapping here of one of the rat-tailed creatures This time it held a small wild cat Other traps yielded a skunk, three 'possums, a weasel and at the swamp edge, an otter There were no 'coons, but a toe in a trap here and a mass of skin and fur there, indicated that two at least had followed their custom of gnawing themselves out A 'coon had been known to gnaw off his foot to get away

Lant said, 'They're hard to git But now if you kin trap you a female in heat and rub the hide acrost your traps, you kin ketch all the ol' male 'coons in the county"

The otter was worth more than all the other hides together It would stretch to six feet when it was drawn over a board to cure

Lant said, "I figgered he belonged to visit that slide last night Otters slides on the four quarters o' the moon But it takes a mighty good trap to hold one If they're jest caught by the skin, they'll twist their bodies and draw theirselves outen the trap A otter kin turn over in his own hide."

The trick in trapping in general, he explained earnestly to Kezzy, was to know the paths by which the animals came and went; and to set the traps, well concealed, without leaving any more human scent than possible.

'You don't want to stomp around a trap," he said

Otters could best be trapped at their slides; 'coons on their trails leading from one half-dried swamp puddle to another, where they fished for crawfish and minnows.

"A 'coon's hell for fishin'," he told her.

Kezzy carried a handful of the limp dead bodies The smell of fur and of musk was strong They figured Lant's profits

He said, "The comp'nies ain't payin' near so much for hides this year Seem like ever body s trappin' 'Cordin' to the new law, you cain t trap but three months Don't look this time like you kin make enough to last you"

'That's what Aunt Pytee was tellin' me last evenin' What'll you do for a livin' if the prices fails you?

He scowled

'It's got me worried up You cain't raise you no money crop on this land no more It s wore out The 'gatorin's give out Time folks quits a while, they ll likely be a livin' in it agin They ain t a thousand feet o' big cypress left in the swamp Time you and Cleve has young uns and they has young uns they ll be big cypress agin Them trees is slow growin'' He pointed to an old stump 'If you was old as that stump, Kezzy, I mean you'd do a piece o' rememberin'"

He had reset his traps and they walked rapidly back along the trail through the swamp They were hungry The autumn air was cool in the shade of the hammock They struck up the bluff and came out into the warm sunlight that yellowed the field back of the cabin Blue smoke curled from the kitchen chimney Piety would have dinner hot and waiting for them

Lant said, 'I ain't broke it to Ma, but if hides keeps droppin' off, all I kin see to do is take her to Palatka and git me a job in the saw mill" Sweat broke out on his forehead at the thought. "We cain't jest set here and starve"

'Is wages good?"

"They pays a dollar and a quarter a day They works you five and a half days You got rent to pay and you got no way o' raisin' hogs and corn and sich You got to buy

grease and meal and meat and all them things But I ain't give up yit I've always had a idee, if a place suits you, you kin make a livin' there somehow"

"I hope you right" She added wistfully, "Wisht Cleve liked the scrub the way you and me do I some kind o' love it"

He skinned his catch in the shade of a live-oak near the smoke house He tacked the hides, fur side down, against the walls During the cool dry winter weather they cured quickly and rolled, salted bundles were ready every week to mail away or to take to the itinerant buyer at Eureka. Kezzy put the dinner on the table and Piety went into the yard and built a fire under the black iron wash pot Kezzy put her smooth black head out of the kitchen window

"What you fixin to do, Aunt Py tee?"

"Cook the varmints for the chickens"

"Tell Lant if he gits a 'possum nice and fat, cheat the chickens and I ll take it home for Zeke.'

'I ll tell him"

The animal bodies, short legged and red, like new-born babies, cooked in the pot The ants climbed the smoke house walls to feast on the scraps of meat and fat clinging to the hides Lant and Kezzy and Piety sat at the kitchen table, neat under checked oilcloth, and ate their dinner zestfully The food was hard come by and its taste was sweet It was doubly fine because the meal was late Kezzy licked the bacon gravy from her fingers

"Them sweet pertaters eats good," she said.

"Ma'd have a fit if she couldn't raise her a bed o' 'taters," Lant said "She keeps 'em bakin' in the oven all day"

He poured cane syrup on his soda biscuit and then sprinkled sugar over the top Kezzy laid down her knife.

"Well, I do know Look at that boy put white sugar on his syrup"

Piety laughed She made a sign to Kezzy over Lant's

head The girl nodded When Lant, finishing ahead of them, left the table and went to the yard, Piety looked after him until he was out of hearing She lowered her voice to a half whisper

"I marked him for white sugar," she confided 'He cain't he'p hisself When I was carryin' him, we had nothin' but brown sugar Willy—that was my husband—Willy was goin' to Orange Springs and I said to him, 'Willy, I've took the biggest notion for some white sugar. Fetch me back a half a pound, for I'd some kind of enjoy it' He comes back and he hands me the sack and he says, 'Here's your white sugar, Py tee' I opens the sack Kezzy, the sugar were brown I says, 'Willy, the sugar's brown' When I said it, I could feel the young un turn over inside me You see I marked him Willy felt awful bad about it'

'You marked him for white sugar, a'right He cain't he'p it"

They sat long at table

Kezzy said slowly, "Anyways, if I marry Cleve and leave the scrub, I still got the river"

Piety said, "You kin come visit me in the scrub ary time'

I shore will do that thing, Aunt Py tee"

At twilight they stirred themselves and the women washed the dishes

Kezzy said, 'I want a big plate o' dinner for the dogs They was mighty faithful comp'ny last night."

Lant sat drowsily, his big feet propped on the apron of the glowing kitchen stove

"Must I make a fire in 'tother room?" he asked

"This is good enough, ain't it, Kezzy? You say"

'This is plenty good. A range seem to warm you better'n a hearth fire"

Lant's red-brown eyes were cloudy The lids drooped The broken night's sleep had drained his gaunt growing

body But he was never too weary to play the banjo He brought it from the trunk and tuned it lazily while the oak coals snapped and burned red in the range There was no other light. The yellow cat came in and jumped with a throaty cry into Piety's ginghamed lap He kneaded his paws and buried his head against her She stroked him

"He's the biggest crazy for me," she said apologetically Their delight was mutual

"You'd orter be out ketchin' rabbits 'stead o' settin' coiled up so," she said to him sternly

For answer he settled deeper in her lap and purred in a vast rumble, blinking his eyes foolishly

"When he comes back from them jants," she said, 'it's rub and purr, rub and purr, until I cain't git nothin' done, for him"

"The ring tailed bastard s no good,' Lant said

He laid his ear against the banjo keys and turned them

"When I m sick in bed with the fever,' the woman said, 'he's perfeckly worried He ll come to the bed and cry"

"He's hongry, Lant said, 'is all ails him"

Kezzy said, "I ll bet Lant do a fine piece o' cookin' when you're sick"

'He'll cook," Piety said, 'but he'll strow the grease until it's a day with the corn shucks scrub when I git outen the bed"

Lant closed his eyes and sang He tapped his foot on the floor and picked the strings of Lantry's banjo.

"If I had a scolding wife
I d switch her sure s you're born.
I d carry her down to Richmond town
And trade her off for corn"

He threw back his head His long neck vibrated He beat time with his feet so that the room shook.

"Git along down, git along down,
Git along down to Richmond town
To lay my t'baccy down"

Piety said, 'Pa sang that"

He drooped his sleepy head over the banjo He played 'Billy in the Low Ground and 'High Sheriff" and 'Blue jay Died with the Whooping Cough He picked idle chords and wondered if he needed to wash his feet before he went to bed The bed would be cold and clean The sheet underneath would be slippery, like thin ice The corn shucks mattress had a nest hollowed out that fitted his body The pile of quilts over him would be as warm as goose feathers

The fire in the range died to embers The wind whistled along the roof tree Piety and the girl were silent Their faces were white and small in the darkness They were warm and drowsy and well fed When the belly was full, and three sat cozily in a warm kitchen, and good beds waited, there was nothing more to be asked for, Piety thought, or had She did not notice that Kezzy s black lashes were wet with tears.

XXI

On Christmas Day Zeke Lantry went across the river to a gathering of Jacklins and Wilsons Kezzy came down the road to spend the holiday with Piety Cleve had come over the day before. He and Lant had roosted a flock of wild turkies at dark At daylight on Christmas they had gone to the swamp Cleve was a poor shot and missed the birds entirely Lant brought down the old gobbler and a young hen They brought them home for Piety and Kezzy to dress and stuff and roast and went away again for a day's deer-hunting

The birds smoked, golden-brown, in the centre of the white tablecloth when Lant and Cleve came in at sunset Piety brought out a blue glass bottle of her scuppernong wine It was white and sparkling A tumblerful apiece made them flushed and talkative Kezzy's black eyes shone and the white skin of her cheeks was touched with a faint colour

"Don't let me git so drunk I cain't fight for my share o' the turkey," she said

Piety said, 'There's enough nobody won't have to quarrel about it"

They ate with zest and sat talking after the meal was done Towards dark they heard a hail at the rear gate.

Piety said, "That sounds like Zeke."

Lant called, "We're too full to come to the door Come in"

A double set of steps sounded, somehow furtively, on the floor of the breezeway. Zeke opened the kitchen door spar

ingly and crowded through, drawing a tall gaunt woman behind him He was tremulous in his excitement

'Who's got a better Christmas present than mine?" he asked 'I goed to the frolic and I got me a wife"

The woman parted her mouth and flashed a gold tooth The mouth snapped shut again The four at the table stared and did not move or speak Piety stirred at last

'Won't you set down to the table and eat?" she asked dubiously

The woman looked over the table

"We've et," she said

She brought a cold hard glance to rest on the younger woman

"You Kezzy?"

The girl stood up

"I'm Kezzy Pleased to meet you"

The woman inclined her head

'Pleased to meet you' She turned to Zeke "Let's git goin'"

Zeke backed out of the door.

"We jest stopped to give you the news," he said 'Come see us, Py tee See you later, Kezzy."

They were gone

Cleve muttered, "God A'mighty"

Kezzy stood numb and bewildered

"You'd of thought Zeke would of told me," she said

Lant said, "He were drunk, ain't that about it?"

She shook her head

'He's been sort o' hintin' at it He's a big ol' tease—I never took it serious"

Cleve began to whistle and stopped to grin

"Looks to me like this about settles your business and mine, Miss biggety Kezzy," he said.

She smiled a little

"We'll see"

Cleve took her home at bed time.

Two weeks later Cleve and Kezzy together stopped at the house They found Piety alone Kezzy had a bulging suit-box under her arm and Cleve carried a worn hand bag Kezzy laid down the box and held the older woman close in her strong arms.

Piety said, "Don't seem like I kin hardly stand it to see you go"

Kezzy said, "I'll come see you Zeke's the one's in trouble, Aunt Py-tee."

"I reckon so I knowed that were a mean woman when I laid eyes on her

The girl laughed shortly

"She thinks Zeke's got money hid out I seed her goin' thu my boxes, scairt I was makin off with it Hell won't begin to tear loose 'til she finds Zeke ain't scarcely makin' a livin'"

"Did Abner let you have that ten-acre farm out his way?"

"He were mighty nice about it He come down on the rent to suit what Cleve had saved up Better come go to Eureka with us, Aunt Py-tee, and see do a justice o' the peace do as good a job as a preacher"

"I got no way to git back, or I'd shore go That Ab's team you got there, Cleve?"

'That's Uncle Ab's. How much money you think a man kin save? I was feered I'd have to cut Kezzy a wed din' ring outen a sardine can 'til I found they wa n t as high as I figgered '

She walked down the lane with them to the gate.

"You better wait 'til Lant gits in from the swamp," she said "He'll feel bad not to see you."

Kezzy said, "You jest tell him good-bye."

Piety waved after the wagon as far as she could see it and Kezzy waved back

Zeke and his new wife kept to their house Lant went to Eureka no oftener than once a month and brought back through the spring no more news of Cleve and Kezzy than that they were farming part of the ten acres and were getting along Piety urged Lant to take her across the river to see them

He said, "I got no time for visitin' right now"

By the middle of May she had decided to row the river herself But in a mid afternoon, trudging across the clearing from the swamp garden, she saw with her failing sight a figure in the breezeway, and shaded her eyes to make sure that it was Kezzy

'You quit stealin my peaches," she called delightedly

She laid her soft wrinkled cheek against that of the young woman

'I knowed somebody were comin'," she said, 'for the rooster crowed in the day time I jest hoped it were you '

Kezzy said, 'I figgered you'd be comin' along soon I could see you'd done been gone 'most all day"

"How'd you know?'

"I could see where all the chickens had tromped out all your tracks It takes chickens 'bout all the day to cover the hull yard"

'You and Lant is perfect sights for keepin' up with tracks."

"I like to know who-all s come and who-all's gone."

'That's what Lant says He'll come in and he ll say, 'Zeke come thu the hammock 'bout a hour 'fore sun and goed back about dusk-dark' Or he'll say, 'Next time you go for fat wood you take the gun and crack down on the Half-breed He's been huntin' your hogs in the scrub today' Lant's a sight that a way."

"Where's the scaper now?"

"He's off down the river some'eres I cain't keep up

with him We fished the creeks this mornin' and took dinner with us He put me out at the swamp landin' and goed back. I don't know where. I been workin' the low garden"

"I been worried to death about you all, Aunt Pytee. Did he go to Palatka?"

"Yes, and to Jacksonville too There wa'n't no job to be had"

"I'm mighty sorry, Aunt Pytee"

"Well, he ain't I don't know as he hunted him a job too hard He says if 'twa'n't for me, he'd rather starve in the scrub than eat light bread in sich places"

She looked intently at the girl

"Kezzy, he acts quare He's up to somethin'"

"Is?"

"He brought back somethin' on the river boat It passed by at dark and Zeke heerd Lant totin' somethin'"

"Zeke's always hearin' things Don't you pay him no mind Lant knows what he's doin'"

Kezzy frowned Cleve had failed to care properly for his spring crops and he would probably lose them, but she was more concerned for Lant and his mother than for herself As long ago as November, when she had gone with him to his traps, she had seen a desperation in his eyes, as of a young bull penned up and fretted for too long a time She sat in the breezeway and listened to the mocking birds and stroked the grizzled head of old Red Black had died soon after she had left the scrub, Piety told her.

They heard the front gate click. Zeke came to the breezeway. He stopped short at sight of Kezzy His mouth quivered and his drake's tails fluttered in his neck She went to him and put an arm across his slight shoulders

'I jest got a good will to quarrel with you," she said "I didn't dast come to you, but I figgered you'd slip off and come to see me"

He looked long at her with unhappy pale eyes

'Py tee," he said, "ain't the sight of her jest meat and drink?"

They sat side by side on the steps and Piety rocked near them

Kezzy asked, "Has your old lady found all that money yit?'

He shuddered His blue eyes were watery

'I m gittin' my just deserts," he said 'I should of left well enough alone You and I were mighty comf table, Kezzy But I got to studyin', how a woman in the house ain't a woman in the bed But I see now, I should of left well enough alone'

He looked at her solemnly

'You know I've always been fond of a leetle whiskey'

She nodded, smiling

'Not enough to harm, but jest a leetle snort He lowered his voice confidentially 'Now I have to keep me a jug hid out in the bushes Then the Lord he'p me do she smell it"

Kezzy said, 'You come to see me, and I ll try to have you a pint you kin set and enjoy decent"

He watched her wistfully

'I feel like I done drove you out Kin you forgive me, Kezzy?"

She laughed easily

"I had it in my mind to marry Cleve right on,' she said 'Don't you take no blame for nothin' I do, no time"

He rose to go.

"I'm jest unlucky with my women," he said

When he had gone, Piety said, 'He shore is unlucky

When he buried your Ma, Syl Jacklin said he couldn't figger what-all a rabbity leetle feller like Zeke could do to his women to wear 'em down to the grave"

Kezzy smiled.

"He's got one now, Aunt Py tee," she said, "he shore won't be lucky enough to lose"

Lant came in for supper at sunset Kezzy hailed him across the yard He grinned broadly He tossed a dead limpkin at her.

"I seed your boat," he said "This speckled bastard were settin' on a limb I knowed you liked 'em"

"I ll carry him home like he was a gold piece I'd won to the Fair."

"Don't do that, for God s sake You and me both'll go to the jail house"

'Don't you belong to shoot limpkins?'

"It's agin the law '

"Well, I want to know, what ain't agin the law!"

'That's what I say! Piety agreed

The youth was excited He walked back and forth through the cabin, taking down his guns from their nails, unrolling a bear skin, whetting his knife on a soap-stone He sat restlessly at table and picked and chose among the dishes. When he had finished, he took his banjo from the trunk but laid it down again without more than tuning it. Darkness took over the cabin and he sat rocking violently in a hickory rocker, shuffling his long legs nervously

'Them cities is a mess, Kezzy," he told her "I got losted in Jacksonville, dogged if I didn't I was to the saw mill oncet with Uncle Ab and I took my bearin's by a big ol' oak tree jest goin' into town Then we made a turn by a yard where they was a boat upside down. Bless Katy, 'tother day, they'd done cut down the oak tree and I never did find me no rowboat in a yard"

She laughed.

"You been used to trees stayin' where you kin find 'em"

"I wouldn't live in a place where they wa'n't no landmarks. It all looked alike"

He jumped up

"Wait 'til I fix us somethin' for some fun"

He disappeared in the kitchen After a few minutes he came back and sat down

"Tell her what 'tis," Piety said

"She'll hear directly You all be still"

They sat in silence for half an hour There was a small explosion and the squeal of a mouse Lant guffawed and Piety chuckled

"Got him," he said

He lit a kerosene lamp and showed Kezzy his patent mouse trap He had rigged up a miniature cannon, loaded with lead from buckshot shells, and attached it to a small storage battery The mouse, stepping on a platform after the bait, completed a circuit, fired the cannon and received a diminutive pellet in his breast The mouse lay dead

Kezzy said, laughing, 'You crazy! Whatever put sich a idee in your head, makin' mice shoot theirselves!'

"The winter evenin's gits kind o' long Hit jest gives Ma and me somethin' to set and listen to" He whispered in her ear 'I'm 'bout to git me somethin' else to listen to"

"Tell me," she whispered back

"You be patient I'll tell you when the time come."

Piety called, 'You noticin' the moon? The buck'll soon be in the sweet pertaters You said you'd try agin tonight."

'I'm a noticin'. Kezzy, let's you and me go 'bout moon down and kill us the scoundrel been usin' in the 'tater field"

She hesitated

"I ain't been feelin' too good, Lant."

"It'll do you good. You're gittin' fat."

"That's jest why I'm startin' me a young un, if you want to know Long as you're so nosey 'bout the way I look. Well," she conceded, "they say if you put a pointer bitch in the woods, and her carryin' pups, they make the finest bird dogs ever Jest born with huntin' sense Mebbe it'll work the same way with a person"

"Kezzy, if it's a litter, save me one Ma'd love a young un to raise"

"If it's a litter,' she said, 'you kin have the hull bunch"

It was good to have Kezzy prowling around with him again They set out across the yard and Piety called after them

I'll wait up for you If I hears you shoot, I'll come with knives and pans'

Kezzy said, This is agin the law too, eh?'

'You mighty right Out o season and fire huntin', too 'Tain't like it was a ways back

'I reckon not I ain't hunted much'

Lant said, They was more game in the scrub when they wa'n't no laws than they is now, with em"

She watched his tense lean back with an affectionate amusement She followed close on his heels, for when she dropped behind, the focussing flashlight fastened to his head shone too far ahead, and she stepped on noisy limbs and stuck the barbs of prickly pear in her ankles He walked quickly across the open clearing through the broom sage, past the scuppernong vine, speaking in hoarse whispers When he reached the fence that joined the hammock he put his fingers to his lips and motioned her to caution He slipped over the fence like an eel and turned to help her climb it without noise. The low palmettos stood flat under the arc of his flashlight The hammock was flat. The broom sage was a golden wash There was no roundness anywhere except the barrel of his gun, smooth as a black snake under the steady light.

His body stiffened His jerking awkwardness disappeared He moved now in slow motion, one position flowing liquidly into another He held his Winchester rifle in his left hand He used his right arm for balance, laying it on the air ahead of him, as though he grasped an invisible support He lifted his right foot with a dancer's grace and laid it down toe first If a palmetto frond was dry and crackling, or a dry twig met his foot, he withdrew it as though it swung on a pivot, and laid it down on another spot

A yellow half moon hung low between two palms Kezzy thought the youth in front of her was like a great red cat in the night, stalking his prey Long nights of hunting had turned his muscles to ribbons of flexibility He flowed through the hammock, his head swinging from side to side like a snake's He focussed his headlight on every clump of palmettos or curtain of low hanging Spanish moss where a deer might stand She could not move as he did She thought that he was very patient to let her spoil his hunt, perhaps, with her clumsiness She understood that he was hunting tonight as any young male animal would hunt, because he was restless and his blood itched in his veins, so that he must scratch it against the moon and the wind and the darkness

He was taking his present direction to keep down wind of the deer Instead of waiting for the buck to come to the potato patch, as he had been doing Lant meant to meet him on the deer run where he came through the hammock from the scrub He took a stand under a low limbed hickory where his light swept the deer trail on both sides. He motioned Kezzy behind him The moon turned to orange against the ledge and only the palm tops were visible A hoot-owl cried over them Suddenly there was a thin shrill squealing under a near by oak and a sneezing

in the dark Lant cursed softly and Kezzy thought the deer had come and gone

"Hammock rabbits," he whispered to her "Them whistlin' bastards" In a moment he whispered again "I'm feerd no deer will come tonight A rabbit's a kind of a witch When the rabbits is feedin' and scaperin', it ginrally means no deer is out When the deer is feedin', no rabbits is out but mebbe a ol buck rabbit, and him keepin' mighty quiet"

Again and again Kezzy thought she heard hoof-beats in the distance She realised that it was her own pulse pounding in her ears When the buck came, she did not hear him Lant put one hand behind him and tightened it on her arm to give her warning He turned his light on the trail between the hammock and the broom sage field The buck came trotting through, his head high The light caught his attention and he stopped short for an instant. His eyes and white throat shone. It seemed to Kezzy that he had time to run to the river, away forever, before Lant shot But the one steel jacketed bullet was all that was needed The buck leaped forward, kicked a moment and straightened out Lant ran to him, then stood with his head as high as the buck's had been He listened The game warden, Bill Mersey, lived ten miles away across the river, but it was reasonable to listen for him.

He said to Kezzy, 'Let s drag him off in the hammock. Then we kin cool out do we hear ary one comin'. Ma'll be here direckly'

Piety came, floundering in the dark without a light, by the time they had the buck in the bushes The single shot had indicated a kill to her, and she had left the house as soon as it was apparent there would not be another She had with her two large dishpans and two heavy knives She fussed and fumed about the danger from the warden

when Lant went fire hunting, but she was as anxious as he to have the meat in the house and the hungry caller out of the cow pea or potato patch Lant skinned the buck, looking for the bullet hole It had passed through the centre of the chest to the heart

He said, 'I m a mind to bury the hide along with the head and sich That nosey Bill Mersey find a hide and head and chitlin's, he ll know good and well the deer didn't jest run off and leave em "

Kezzy said, "Roll it up for me, Lant I ll take it home with me in the mornin' I been wantin' a deerskin for the side o' the bed the worst way I ain't afeerd o' Bill I kin ask him out of ary thing '

He cut the meat into pieces and piled as much in the pans as they would hold He guessed the deer's weight at something over a hundred pounds The scrub deer seldom weighed over a hundred and fifty Piety and Kezzy each took a pan and he strung a strip of palmetto through the remaining pieces and slung them over his shoulder He covered the refuse with woods debris

"Now you git," he said "If you hears ary sound, you stop dead in your tracks"

He switched off his flashlight and led the women to the house in darkness They put the meat in the smoke house and he double barred the door

'Tomorrow," he said, "I'll smoke hell outen it before Bill comes moseyin' around"

He had his pants and shoes off before the women had finished talking in Piety's bedroom They heard him strike the bed and when they passed his room to wash their faces for the night, he was asleep

In the morning he asked Kezzy to go to the river with him

'I'm in a slow hurry," she said "'Tain't right to leave my ol' man Cleve too long"

They sat in silence while he paddled the rowboat through the swamp and down the river. She asked no questions. When he swung the boat under a clump of laurel and up a shallow creek, she looked at him

"I reckon I know," she said

"Wa'n't nothin' else to do, Kezzy"

"No, 'twa'n't," she agreed slowly, "and stay in the scrub"

"You remember the place?" he asked "Taylor's Dread?"

"I don't know who'd remember better Lest it's Zeke hisself Do Zeke know?"

He nodded

"Zeke told me jest what to start off with"

She smiled

"The cute ol' scaper—never lettin' on to Aunt Pytee——"

He landed in muck, a half mile of tortuous travelling from the river He led her in to the swampy heart of the island to the site of Zeke's old still The freight he had brought with him from Jacksonville was two large squares of sheet copper. [illegible] from old [illegible]
and salvaged ho[illegible]
Zeke's old brick [illegible]
listened quietly as he explained what further was to be done. She walked about examining the assembled materials

"You got money to git you started?" she asked.

"I got no cash money left I figgered the storekeeper to Eureka'd trust me for meal and sugar to git goin'."

"He's trustin' half a dozen on my side the river for the same thing He's been mighty good to trust ever'body You got plans for sellin' it?"

"Not special They was hunters here all winter askin' where could they git whiskey I figgered they'd come ask agin"

"Lant," she said, "how old you, boy? 'Bout twenty? You

sure you know what all you're doin'? I'd mighty hate to see you git into trouble What'd your Ma do for a livin', and you in the jail house?'

"What'll she do for a livin' if I don't git to makin' one? I don't aim to see the inside o' the jail house Nobody cain't slip up on me here They's a risk, I know that I'm jest natchelly countin' on nary snooper gittin' in to this lay-out'

"It's mighty well hid-out," she agreed "Couldn't nobody but you find the way in here"

'Dogged if I know why I ain't thought of it before," he said 'I've always knowed they was a livin' makin' corn liquor You've heerd Zeke say he shouldn't never of quit He jest got skeert I someways never thought about it before'

'You got it to think about now, son,' she said drily

They walked back to the boat The channel reassured her as Lant poled out to the river again There were a dozen blind leads and only one true entrance Time and again the water was so shallow, or ran over so obstinate an obstruction, that any one would have turned back, refusing to believe there was an opening and an end

'You're jest a wild enough scaper," she said, "to where it'll suit you perfect It'd jest suit you, givin' a mess o' strangers the slip'

[illegible] objections [illegible] " he assured he [illegible] "

'Well," she said at last, "'tain't like it was somethin' wrong 'Shinin's an honest trade A man buys his meal and sugar and he pays for 'em and he takes 'em and makes somethin' other folks wants"

XXII

Wisps of smoke wavered from the swamp below the clearing where Lant's whiskey still was working The ash wood used for firing burned with a clear flame, only an occasional thread columned blue white against the cobalt sky Zeke saw it from his stoop and when his wife s back was turned, slipped away Lant had moved his outfit up from Taylor s Dread the week before after an undisturbed year Zeke had not visited him in the new location If he had timed Lant's activities correctly, the first new batch of mash must be due to run The smoke against the summer sky was encouraging Zeke's jug was empty and he was thirsty

As he cut through the hammock to the swamp, he whistled like a quail He gave the mating call, which was out of season, for the young quail were lately hatched An answering whistle came back and he struck openly along the creek The outfit stood exposed to plain view Yet nothing but the sheerest accident—such as hunters and dogs on the trail of a deer—would bring a stranger here.

Lant had built a wooden platform high over the slow running creek There was room for the rowboat to pass [illegible] On the platform stood

[illegible]

saplings into the creek-bed at the four corners and made a canopy over the whole. Palmetto fronds formed a neat thatched roof Lant squatted on his haunches in front of

the furnace, stoking the fresh fire with small sticks of immaculate white ash

He said, 'Hey, Uncle Zeke," without turning

Zeke said, 'I m about in time to he'p you run a charge, dogged if I ain't"

"I ll put you to work direckly, don't you worry about that"

Zeke peered into the cooker

"How much do the pot hold?'

'The buck from two barrels I only got one barrel dipped out I'm somethin' late I figgered I d git my fire goin' You kin finish dippin' from the other barrel Don t you rile the buck"

Zeke said mildly, You got no call to tell me how to handle mash, boy"

He investigated the barrels The one Lant had just dipped out into the cooker, showed a loose sediment over a residue of close packed cornmeal at the bottom Two barrels of mash were midway in their fermentation They seethed and bubbled The hissing sounded like a thin batter being poured on a hot griddle The cap had formed and the surfaces were covered with foam and small particles The fourth barrel was the mate to the one Lant had emptied The cap had settled The liquid, with an alcoholic content of some twenty proof, was clear

Zeke said, "Jest about here is where a feller got to hurry The buck goes flat in no time, and you jest as good to pitch the mash in the creek, for you ll git no more alcohol".

'You don't need to tell me about the beer goin' flat," Lant said "That were my first mistake"

'Lettin' it stand too long, eh?

"Lettin' it stand"

Zeke rinsed the bucket with creek water and dipped the strong sour liquid from the barrel into the cooker The ash fire underneath reached a flaming climax of orange

heat. Lant fed it again. The sheet copper shone, hot and clean The buck in the cooker began to simmer Lant stirred the blazing sticks to fierce coals. The liquid bubbled and made a complete turn-over, like soap-suds boiling The pot was ready to cap

Zeke helped him fit on the tight cypress cover Its protruding copper pipe made an angled turn and joined the copper coils immersed in a barrel of cold water Lant raked some of the fire from out the furnace. Zeke nodded.

"A low steady heat s the thing, all right, son," he approved.

The ash burned evenly The cooker was vibrant with energy Zeke dipped the bucket into the emptied barrels and mucked off the sediment, leaving the dense mass of meal intact at the bottom.

"Here s your bed, he said

"Put a chinchy couple o buckets o' fresh meal in each barrel, please sir, Uncle Zeke. That bag yonder"

The old man measured the cornmeal carefully

"I got to have he p with the sugar," he said. "I cain't git a hundred-pound sack this high and not waste it"

Lant left the fire and came to him They lifted the bag together and shook the sugar in the barrels, fifty pounds to each Zeke measured creek water with an affectionate slowness

"Now a bucket-two o' hot buck from the pot, time your charge is run, and these here scapers'll go to work for you. Dog take it, Lant, this is a fine business. I shouldn't never of quit."

"You better start up agin Go partners with me, if you say"

He shook his head.

"Hit s too late now I jest ain't spry enough to run."

Lant laughed. The fire burned to slow coals. He sat by Zeke at the edge of the platform. They dangled their legs

over the creek and spoke in a low monotone that carried no more than a few feet

Lant said, "This is the least worrisome business I ever been into"

Zeke said, "I ain't talkin' about worry When lightnin' strike, you got no time to worry' He sang softly, under his breath

> *"Raccoon is a cunnin' thing,*
> *Travels in the dark*
> *Don t know what trouble is*
> *'Til he hears ol Ranger bark"*

He added, "Then he know"

Lant spat into the swamp

'I jest don't figger them gov'mint 'Rangers' is goin' to bark up this creek, he said

Zeke agreed Well, I reckon hit ain t likely Floridy ain t never been too much bothered that a way Take back when I were makin' it Up to the time I had that pure accident, you never heerd tell o' no revenooers in these parts 'Course, the law was different then Whiskey makin' was all right if you paid the tax Half the folks I knew, used to make a leetle jest for theirselves Sho, nobody paid no mind"

Lant moved across the platform to mend the fire A slow procession of crystal drops passed out at the end of the copper spout Where the sun struck, they flashed blue white like diamonds. Lant touched his finger to the spout and tasted the warm liquid He winced and held his lips open to the air to cool them

"Take a fool to drink that first of it," he said "It'd burn the guts outen you if it ever got past your throat"

Zeke went on with his ruminations

"Now they've got the new law since the war," he said, "and nobody don't belong to make whiskey at all, no-way,

no time, tax or no tax And boy, don't you think them new kind o' revenooers ain't comin' into the state And the county, too But now, hit's one thing for them strangers to find a still in open blackjack Or by a branch in the piney woods This here river is jest another matter"

Lant grinned

"Them tryin' to find their way thu the swamps, eh? Sinkin' down in the muck—puttin' their ol' hands on a log and jest missin' a moccasin—I reckon it don't suit them Prohis too good"

Zeke said, "'Bout the only way they'd git to a feller 'round here'd be for somebody to turn him up Ain't nobody fixin' to do that All the Jacklins hates Lem Posey Sharp Kinsley romps on Luke Saunders mighty nigh ever' time he crosses his tracks Sho, Lem and Luke got no cause to fear they'll have their livin' interfered with A man's livin' is somethin' it takes a mighty low-down white man to mess with"

Lant said, "Well, I don't mess up with nobody no-ways I figger ain t nobody ll mess up with me"

"You'll keep outen a heap o' trouble," Zeke said, "mindin' your own business and keepin' to the scrub this-a way Hit's a scaper like Lem Posey ll git the law takin' notice, always whoopin' and sooeyin' and sic-a-boyin' the way he do"

They sat in silence

Zeke asked, 'How's ol' Red?"

Lant said, "He's been havin' more o' them fits He seemed some better when I left the house this mornin'"

It made him unhappy to talk about Red and he began to hum under his breath The warm crystal stream dripped steadily from the coils The scent of the distillate was rank and sweet

Zeke said, "That's about fitten now"

Lant said, "Take a can and git you a drink."

The old man gulped half a cupful Courage and discontent possessed him

'I m goin' on home," he announced, 'and git my old woman told"

Lant was as well pleased to be alone After Zeke's steps had faded away, he went to his favorite seat in an area he had cleared in the hammock above the creek He sat with his back to a magnolia overlooking the platform, hunched, idle with the immobility of an animal He liked the work, he reflected He had liked it from the beginning He would want to make corn liquor, he thought, if there wasn't a dollar in it There was, in fact, a good living His profits during the year ranged from four to ten dollars a week Moonshining was more certain than farming, than trapping or 'gatoring

He liked the smell of the sour mash and the heat of the copper When he ran a charge at night, he liked the blue flame of the burning ash in the black of the night, and the orange glow on the sweet gum leaves Here he liked the intimacy with the hammock Its life washed over him and he became a part of it The scrub yonder sent its furred and feathered inhabitants past him to eat and drink, and he and the scrub were one

He liked to know all there was to be known of every animal and bird and tree At the Dread he had seen a wood-duck walk down with her puff ball ducklings on her back, submerging in the cool creek water so that the young ones were floated gently on the new element He had watched pole-cats with their young in single file Black snakes had mated a few feet away Since he had moved to the swamp below the clearing he had seen a wild cat with her kittens, and half grown fox pups tumbling within a stone's throw of him, quarrelling over a rabbit

Beyond the still he could glimpse his mother's swamp garden, where she grew collards and turnip-greens in the

dampness the year around Seeing a shadowy movement there, he crept close. A pair of quail trailed by a new hatched covey was feeding under the tall collards They reached on tiptoe, turning their small heads this way and that, picking insects from the under leaves The cock kept up a running conversation, making small sweet sounds, to which the hen now and then responded Lant swooped down and picked up half a dozen of the young in his square brown hand, each bird no bigger than his thumb He said to the fluttering adult birds, Hell, I ain't fixin' to harm 'em,' held them a moment and let them go

He thought he heard the sly dip of a paddle out on the river He held his breath Any untoward sound was the signal to stop and listen the clatter of a squirrel along hickory limbs, the crackle of twigs in the swamp, an alarmed flight of duck or crane or water turkey Sounds from the river he dreaded most From that way would come danger Listening, his innate wariness was intensified But the ripple he had heard was only the murmur of the river current. It breathed sometimes like a live thing

The new buck was yielding the proper amount and quality of raw whiskey Ten gallons averaged a hundred and twenty proof He jugged it and ran into separate containers another eight gallons of low wine that tested forty The low wine was sour tasting and full of undesirable elements He was tempted to mix some of it with the first run whiskey, for he had an order for more than he could fill Many 'shiners, he knew, drew a scant line between the two grades. He decided to follow his custom of adding the low wine to the fresh buck when he ran his next charge, re-distilling it to extract the alcohol and leave behind the impurities

He thought, "I'd not drink the stuff the way 'tis and I ll not sell it to no other man to drink"

He dipped out buckets of steaming buck from the cooker and added one to each of the two barrels of fresh set mash to hurry fermentation He planned always to set new mash at the time he ran a charge Then the old bed of meal, which needed to be changed only every two months, was not wasted Sometimes he was not paid on time for his whiskey and he was without cash for sugar Then he must either ask the storekeeper for credit, which was distasteful, or let the old bed of meal spoil, and start all over again when he was in funds The proportion of fifty pounds of sugar and thirty gallons of water to each fifty gallon barrel was the same on any set up The waste was in the meal, for it took fifty pounds to start a barrel of mash all over again

He puckered his lips and whistled soundlessly He was pleased with the run, pleased with the new location A summer rain had set in He worked in comfort under the thatched roof Silver sheets of rain slid musically down the palmettos Beyond the platform limpkins walked stiff legged in the downpour, searching the creek for snails

He concealed the jugs of fresh liquor under adjacent low palmettos and went to the house in the rain Piety was waiting on the breezeway She wore a print dress the colour of her hair He noticed her greyness, blending with the grey of the rain

She said, 'Hit ll soon fair off Why didn't you wait? Seem to me you jest enjoy gittin' soaked to the hide'

He said, "Hit's the next best thing to goin' naked' He looked at her "What's the matter, Ma?'

"You'll hate it," she said "You'll jest perfeckly hate it Red died while you was to the outfit"

His throat tightened

He said, "He's out lasted hisself He should of died two-three years ago"

'I know you feel bad," she said

His eyes burned He set his teeth She had not complained of Red in late years, for the dog had become gentler, but he said, 'Well, I know you don't I know you re jest proud he's gone You ll have nothin' but them bastardly cats to feed"

She blinked at him He turned and walked across the yard and into the smoke house She watched after him Then she went into the kitchen and fired the range and baked a sweet potato pie She watched him at the supper table, but he seemed unconscious of the deep-lidded eyes fixed on his face He was restless He bent his head low over his plate, his forelock almost touching it He ate his potato pie

He said, "'Tain t as good as Kezzy's"

He cut himself another piece

He said, 'I m goin' some place tonight"

'Some place acrost the river?

'I dunno"

'This is Friday You like not to find Cleve and Kezzy to the house She said two weeks ago they aimed to go to the next frolic."

'I ain't said nothin' about Cleve and Kezzy I'm like to go to the damn frolic myself"

XXIII

The girl was small, almost as small as Piety The first time Lant swung her in the square dance, he was astonished at her lightness When he passed her again he said to her, Must be you don t weigh no more n a full growed field lark She looked at him gravely and dropped her eyes

He danced fiercely, all arms and legs, like a jack-on-the stick His shaggy forelock dangled between his eyes His blue shirt stuck to his back where the sweat had moistened it He was lean and ugly and virile, and the girls cut their eyes at him and pushed him impudently Lottie Hobkirk said Lant Jacklin, I jest as soon be swung by a pole, as you He grinned in answer, amiably enough

At the end of the set he saw the small light girl go to the long bench above the fiddlers platform The boy with her asked a question She shook her head and the boy went outside where some of the young bloods were wrestling and tumbling Lant walked to the bench He discovered himself sitting by the girl as though he had walked there in his sleep He had nothing to say and was sorry he had come Her hands were folded in her lap She
ed [illegible] When he saw that she was not
ing at [illegible] turned furtively to watch her He
[illegible]d that [illegible] of a field lark because her hair
the taw[illegible] of the bird s throat It was drawn
over [illegible] it looked soft and ruffled like
S[illegible] pointed chin was like the

neatness of a lark's bill She looked frightened He shuffled his feet

He was conscious that someone had crossed the platform and was sitting on the other side of him He turned quickly Kezzy was looking at him curiously He was relieved She put a hand on his bony knee

"Now I want to know what put it in your head to come to the frolic," she said "Cleve and the baby and me come in the door jest now and I says to Cleve, 'Cleve, I wouldn t be no more surprised to see a cattymount settin' up there behind the fiddlers'"

"Nobody but you kin dance and carry on, I reckon'

He tried to remember what had been in his mind when he left the scrub The buff headed girl left the bench and slipped along the wall to the far end of the dance hall He was depressed again

'I jest takened the notion to hear somebody's music besides my own" He remembered 'Red's done dead," he said

"The pore ol' feller—" She sat silent a moment "You didn't bring Ardis to the dance, then?"

'I didn't carry nobody"

"I figgered you was together until I noticed you wa'n't talkin' to her."

He craned his long neck to look down the room Kerosene lamps flickered high on the walls and obscured the room beyond He was aware that Kezzy was asking him a question He turned blankly She looked at him thoughtfully She smiled a little. She rose and rested her hand an instant on his shoulder and went across the room where Cleve had turned the baby over to the older women Mrs Kinsley puffed to the platform

"I got your quarter yet?" she asked cheerfully

"You shore ain't I was about figgerin' on dancin' free."

He was alone above the fiddlers Old man Lonny Sours

tuned up and tried out the melody The next set was forming The floor was crowded Cleve and Kezzy stood hand in hand below him Kezzy whistled quickly to catch his attention She jerked her head towards the group of girls and women at the other end of the hall

She whispered to him across the fiddlers, "She's got nobody with her, Lant"

The caller and his partner came in the door and took their places in the circle Lant hurried from the bench and past the waiting dancers The girl stood between two old women He held out his hand to her and she put hers in it

He said, "We got to hurry We 'bout to git left"

He was conscious of her hand He held it as carefully as he had held the young quail in the afternoon The tune was 'Sally Good Un Its liveliness tempted him to gallop, but he tried to tone down his pace Swinging her, the girl seemed fragile He was afraid of snapping her to pieces He breathed easily again when he passed and swung Kezzy Her solidity was comforting He heaved her towards him so that her feet flew up behind her Her breasts were hard and full against him

When the set was ended he took the girl s arm and led her to the bench He leaned over and asked, "You want a dope?" She nodded He whistled shrilly to the Kinsley boy and fished in his pocket for a dime for the two bottles of Coca Cola She sucked at her bottle slowly and daintily He watched her steadily She looked out over the room or down into her lap, tracing the pattern in her dress with one finger. Suddenly he imitated the distant chattering of a squirrel One of the fiddlers turned to look and the girl opened her eyes wide and full at Lant They were grey-blue, with long lashes He laughed loudly

"You better look at me," he said "I been studyin', if I couldn't git you to look at me, how'd you know me agin?"

She said, "I know you You're Lant Jacklin"

He said, "You got a tongue, too. I'd 'bout figgered I'd takened up with a dumbie."

She dropped her eyes Girls usually tormented him, trying to make him talk. It delighted him to be tormenting her.

He said, "You keep on, you'll purty near tell me somethin'."

She said, "You live in the scrub"

He laughed and nodded.

"If they wa'n't so many folks around," he said, "I'd show you how a panther screams It scares folks," he added, "if they ain't expectin' it"

Her eyes were wide again

"Are there many panthers there?"

"Mighty few They keeps to theirselves mostly, over in the bay head flats You ain't never been across the river?"

She shook her head.

He said eagerly, "How'd you like to come go huntin' with me, time the season opens?"

She said, "I've never shot a gun"

He said disconsolately, "Well—" He studied her. "You so small and light," he said, "I reckon you couldn't scarcely tote a gun" He remembered his mother, lifting a gun almost as long as her body "You could too, by God," he said fervently "Your shoulders is slopin' and narrer—you'd need a lot o' drop in a gun stock. A 410 is what you want, or a 22 rifle, with a short stock and plenty o' drop"

She said, "I like to fish"

"I bet your wrist is good and limber for castin'."

"I don't mean casting My father fishes that way. I mean, with a pole."

"Oh—nigger fishin'." He brightened. "That's the onliest way to ketch bait for set lines. It's a trick now, to ketch very small bream with them leetle pin hooks"

They fell silent. The sets were called and danced and ended, called and danced again People were going home He was amazed that the dance was over The girl slid from the bench and went to the door

She said to him over her shoulder, 'Good bye'

She disappeared into the darkness Panic swept him He jumped from the fiddlers' platform to the floor and followed after her She had joined a group of women He pulled at her sleeve

He said hoarsely, "Ardis! How 'bout you comin' to the next frolic? I'm comin' if you'll come You meet me here?'

She said, "Yes"

XXIV

The scrub had fewer inhabitants than for fifty years. The stretch in front of the Lantry clearing that had been low growing, with far vistas, was dense and dark with growth Its pines, grey trunked and scrawny, crowded close together The entire region was again almost a virgin wilderness Yet the law had come into the scrub and lay over it like a dark cloud

Several years ago the government had taken over the greater bulk of it, unowned, uninhabited Thousands of acres at its heart were now a game refuge, where no one might hunt or trap Fire towers had been established here and there There had been panic among the few inhabitants Old man Paine, whose clearing lay in the new reservation, had died recently in a burst of frustration

"I ve killed me hun'erds o' deer in my time,' he had told Lant sorrowfully, "and with my age upon me, the law says I got no right to take me a leetle piece o' venison to fill my pore ol' guts"

Even the piney woods side of the river had felt uneasy, living so close to an unwelcome neighbour They had pictured federal spies behind every clump of palmettos They craved venison in August as they had never craved it before There were still immense areas that might be hunted during the open season But it had seemed at first, with one section shut off by invisible lines, as though there were no other section worth hunting The deer had come to be called "gov'mint cows" and "gov'mint yearlin's"

It had become apparent, as the years passed quietly, that

the government was as remote as ever There were no lurking spies, no agents, no tangible evidence of the federal hawk circling in a clouded sky There was nothing in the scrub, except game, that any one wanted The Southern spruce, or sand pine, was valueless, even to the government The varmints came obligingly to the swamps to be trapped as before The deer still came to the river to drink If a man hunted carelessly on into what a small sign designated as a National Forest, there was no living creature to know

The fire towers had proved harmless Each held a lonely fellow who lived at the top and kept a watch for forest fires The man in the Salt Springs tower was from Georgia He invited Lant up to the top to look out over the rolling scrub and see his maps and implements The government, he said, wanted only to keep away the devastating fires and to give the game a place for breeding He played an old flute that had belonged to his grandfather in the War of the States One night, down the narrow sandy Salt Springs road, Lant heard him high up above the trees, tootling eerily on his flute The notes had dropped sweetly over the scrub, like the cries of a lost soul riding the sky

Now in a dry November the heart of the scrub was burning Since morning the smell of smoke had grown stronger Lant was running a charge at his outfit His nose twitched like a rabbit's He uncapped the cooker and put out the fire in the brick furnace before he had run off the usual amount of low wine He added hot buck to the two new settings of mash He had two demi johns of whiskey and one of low wine He drove the corks in firmly and buried them in the soft black muck of the creek bed He hurried to the house and joined his mother on the front stoop They shaded their eyes against the round ball of sun, red and sick behind the greyness that was smoke in the east

'The hell of it is, he said, "the gov'mint'll be here direckly'

Piety nodded It was reasonable, she agreed, that the federal government would send men to put out fire on its own property The danger was manifold The wind was *from the north-east* If it turned into the east, worse, into the south-east, the fire itself would sweep towards the river across the scrub and would lick up the Lantry clearing, broom sage, fences, shingled house and all Yet it was men, not fire, he dreaded There would be not only strange federal men swarming in the scrub, but sheriffs and their deputies, game wardens and the like He minded a gam-warden the least He could fool a warden any time Bill Mersey had never bothered him

'Jest the same, them boogers is all mixed up together," he said to Piety 'I got no question Bill *carries* what he sees to the Prohis, and the Prohis does the same for Bill"

He pictured the fire sweeping towards the river, and the fire and Bill Mersey and the high sheriff and the Prohis smoking out his still like a rabbit warren Bill Mersey was Ardis' cousin He had forgotten her all day Ardis Mersey She had lived in a town and gone to school and had come back *to the piney woods where her father had fallen heir* to her grandfather's prosperous lands It was incredible that she had been away and out of his mind all these years simply because he had not known her

He had intended to row across the river after he ran his charge to tell her that the scrub was on fire and he could not take her that night to Abner Lantry s cane grinding In *September he had let a setting of mash go flat* because he had promised to go with her to a peanut-boiling

He said to Piety, "My girl's like to think mighty hard of me, but I reckon I better git goin' acrost the scrub to see what that fire's a-doin'"

"You've been mighty faithful for about four months She

hadn't orter take it hard" She looked at him, still shading her eyes 'You call her your girl to her face?"

He shook his head

"I m feered I ll scare her I got to sort o' slip up on her"

"Don't you be too sure about that" She laughed 'I ve noticed it ain't hard to slip up on a girl if she's of a notion to be slipped up on"

He said, "She d be off like a dove if I was to put my hand on her"

'Well, you'd orter know"

They stared into the murky east Their eyes smarted. They heard voices across the clearing Cleve and Kezzy and two Wilson men were coming through the rear gate Kezzy's youngster was old enough to walk a little, but she carried him in her arms The woman and three men pushed hurriedly through the sand The men carried axes and spades

Lant called, 'You got news about the fire? I was jest about to git on the mule and go look for it"

One of the Wilsons said, "We got news, all right South o' Lake Delancey the hull Big Scrub's a-burnin' The fire warden to the Salt Springs tower jest now sent a boy ridin' hell bent into Eureka for he'p Ever'body's called out to he'p fight"

Lant said, "Cleve, you know where all the harness is at You go git it while I ketch the mule"

On his way across the yard he tolled his grandfather's farm bell to call in Zeke

Kezzy said, "Aunt Py tee, let's you and me load some jugs o' water in the wagon and what bread and meat you got cooked."

The men loaded axes and hoes and shovels The women would go along and drive the wagon back again By the time they were ready Zeke had arrived He climbed in and they rattled down the road. A few miles to the south they

turned left and took the Salt Springs road through the heart of the scrub It was inches deep in shifting sand The smoke grew more acrid Cleve and the Wilsons talked excitedly Piety and Lant and Zeke and Kezzy were silent, with drawn faces The wind was still out of the north-east

Cleve said, 'You don t figger on fire in November"

But the summer had been dry, frost had come early, and the scrub was like tinder The floor was carpeted with parched brown pine needles Dead palmetto fronds were like oil soaked paper Old lighter d knots and fallen pine limbs made a network of inflammability Cars and wagons and men riding mules and horses were on the road, some going towards the fire, other cars and wagons had dropped their men and were going back for more Lant turned the mule off the single track road when he met a car, for wheels spun helplessly out of the deep ruts To another wagon he gave half of the road Hands lifted in passing but there was no friendly hailing Faces were grave Men who were not concerned, even for the endangered game, were coming away startled from that sea of flame

The billowing smoke had been visible for the past five miles Within a mile the fire was plain leaping like red tongued dogs after juicy bones of palmetto and oak and pine The roar, overlaid with a sharp crackling filled their ears above the thump of mule hooves in the sand Lant tied the mule in the scrub off the road and they walked in Kezzy went with them Piety sat in the wagon and held the baby It was strange to have them go away and leave her A brief time ago she would have been in it with the men

Government fire lines had been ploughed a few years before, but grass and weeds had grown over them and had dried in the drought The fire had taken the first set of ditches like a runaway horse Men were working far to the south, widening and clearing the fire lines as yet un

reached Ahead, an open area lay in the path of the flames. Men were back firing here, and beating out the fire of their own making with green palmetto fronds and pine saplings.

Newcomers joined Lant and Cleve and Zeke and the two Wilsons and they set to work as a unit, without orders The fire warden could be seen on a slight rise, directing the line of fight Fire was a familiar to men of the piney woods and they needed scant instructions The Florida woods burned every spring

"Thanks to them turpentine men," Kezzy said, 'burnin' out the brush so they kin git to their boxes, and not keerin' what happens to the rest o' the woods'

Zeke said, 'Yes, and the cattle men has been as bad"

Kezzy said, 'Well, I cain't see a mess like this un and not git into it"

She borrowed Lant's light axe and cut a sapling for herself She worked beyond the Wilsons, beating out the fresh flames as they fired The wind freshened and within an hour it was plain that most of the front would have to be abandoned Across one corner a burned-over patch turned the fire, but the great body of it rolled in The sound, so close, was terrifying The green leaves of oak and myrtle and gallberry and palmetto exploded like fire crackers The floor of the scrub burned with a snake like sizzling The dry pine tops burst into flame with a roar Balls of fire leaped twenty feet at a jump

Zeke shouted, "I never heerd no storm come thu the pines with sich a noise"

From a slight elevation to the south west where they had retreated, the conflagration could be seen as a sweeping flood It rolled in billows, the flaming surf of an infernal sea Other groups joined them, waiting a moment to see which lines would hold, and where they must go at it again Here and there the advance of the fire cast itself helplessly where there was no fresh fuel Watching, they

saw it leap, because of a slight shift of wind, or for no apparent reason at all, across an entire small area, or skirt around an island of slash or long leaf pine

Kezzy worked with the men until late in the afternoon They were blackened with smoke and charcoal Their eyes shone inflamed in dirty faces They realized that Cleve had been missing for two or three hours They walked in a body to the wagon for drinking water and to inquire after him Beyond the wagon, under a myrtle bush, they saw the man, asleep The Wilsons nodded to each other, their eyes narrowing

Lant said to Zeke, "Go rout him out"

Eph Wilson said, "Hell, leave him go on in with the wagon, or go on sleepin' He's no he'p, noways"

Kezzy turned scarlet under her dirt Eph gulped

"Exscuse me, Kezzy No offense

"No offense," she agreed lightly She added quickly, "He were 'coon huntin' all last night"

Eph said politely, "That so?"

Piety unwrapped the food she had brought. They turned from the wagon, wiping their mouths

Lant said, "Kezzy, you quit now and go home with Ma"

She frowned

"You'll starve your damn young un if you don't take keer of him"

Piety said anxiously, "'Tain't right, Kezzy You'll give him the colic, and you so hot and sweatin'"

Kezzy took the sleepy body from Piety She laid her face against the silky head A streak of black came off on the child's cheek

"Gittin' you smutted— Folkses'll think I had you puttin' out the fire" She said reluctantly, "I'll go on in We'll come back if you don't git in soon"

Lant said, "If we cain't lick this soon, we jest as good to dare out and let her rip"

Zeke and the Wilsons started away

Lant said, "Kezzy, you do somethin' for me? When you go home this evenin', git word to Ardis why I ain't comin'."

'She'll know," she said easily "Bill Mersey was comin' over"

"She jest might not hear'

'Lant, I wasn't figgerin' on goin' home I'll likely be drivin' the wagon back here after night fall You don't need to fret about Ardis not knowin'"

"All right"

He turned away, wiping the grime from his face His back was dejected She understood that he wanted the small yellow headed girl to know—not that he would not come—but that he was sick at heart because he could not She walked after him and pulled his sleeve

'I'll row acrost soon's I git your Ma to the house and tell Ardis you're sorry,' she said, and hurried to the wagon again

He looked back in a moment She was leaning over the snoring man under the myrtle bush He heard her say desperately, 'Cleve, for God's sake—" He felt guilty Kezzy, with her breasts stretched hard and tight for her child, rowing across the river, smutty faced and weary and damp with sweat, to take his casual word to the pale, bird like girl who was afraid of him— He plunged into the thick of the fire fighting The warden was setting dynamite and it gave promise of checking the advance

The fire continued through the night Zeke Lantry's harridan, frightened, joined Piety and Kezzy and helped them cook food and make gallons of coffee They put the coffee in Lant's demi johns and wrapped the jugs in thick blankets of Spanish moss to keep them hot Setting out towards the Salt Springs road a little before midnight, they could see the whole eastern sky ablaze Miles away, a

cloudy roar came to their ears, as though bull alligators battled and bellowed in the distance

Fresh men arrived in the morning from farther settlements. The first day's fighters crawled away from the front of the fire, far advanced and inexorable, and fell on the pine needled earth for an hour's rest Towards noon the wind shifted and the sky clouded In the early afternoon a light shower sprinkled its way across the burning scrub At four o'clock rain fell in sheets The red tongues flickered high against it Steam began to rise in clouds and join the descending greyness

Men laughed and shouted and corn whiskey appeared They sat on their heels and joked suddenly Stumps smouldered and tall trunks smoked, but the fire was done for The Big Burn lay black and desolate, as it was to lie for years, with skeletons of trees reared against a sky that would seem here always of hot and dirty steel The unburned patches stood anomalous, as though they had known a secret and evil magic to turn the flames

Cars and wagons and horses and mules were all moving towards the river again Cleve and Kezzy and the Wilsons had gone home in Abner Lantry's automobile Piety waited on a side trail with the wagon Lant and Zeke were among the last men to leave Lant was light hearted He had seen almost no strangers, certainly no federal men Turning down the dim side road he saw a small figure running past the pines The blood beat against the top of his head

He called, "Ardis!"

She was white with terror. She ran to him and sobbed breathlessly against his arm He stroked her sleeve gently. Zeke shuffled his feet uncertainly a moment and hurried ahead of them

Lant soothed her, "Easy, honey Was you losted? What you doin' out here, anyway?"

She caught her breath and laughed a little.

"I came with Father and Cousin Bill, just to see I saw some girls I knew, in a car down the road When I came back, I couldn't find any one"

'Why, honey," he said, 'I seed Bill and your daddy drive by a half hour ago They must of figgered you d gone on"

He pulled a handful of moss from a pine and wiped her eyes She quieted

"You'll take me home," she said

Piety clambered down stiffly from the wagon to meet the girl

"Zeke jest figgered you was Ardis,' she said cordially "You come set on the wagon seat between Lant and me and keep warm"

Dusk fell before six o'clock and the scrub road was dark and winding The wagon rattled and the mule jogged steadily and Zeke whistled behind them, hanging his feet over the tail boards

Piety said, "Wa'n't your Pa Thomas Mersey? Lant, I tol' you Ardis' Pa were the one I knowed I went to school with Tom when I was a gal young un The leetle I went, Tom Mersey were in the school when I was"

Ardis said, "We were all away a long time"

'That's what Lant said You glad to be back?"

'Father's glad I like it better now"

Lant felt her arm warm against him He wanted to shout down the length of the shadowy road The fire was out, the scrub would not burn to the river's edge, there had been no agents of the law on an inch of his land There was no more danger, from fire or from folk, and Ardis sat next to him on the wagon-seat He began to sing loudly in his high nasal minor He sang 'Comin' Round the Mountain" and Zeke hummed with him Ardis laughed

She said, "I like that I forget it's dark when you're singing"

Where the road branched two ways, one towards Eureka, the other towards the Lantry clearing, he stopped the mule

'Miss Ardis,' he said, 'hit's a two-hour job to git you home tonight This way, or from my place acrost the river If your daddy figgers you're with a passel o' gals, won t he figger you're stayin' the night with 'em?'

'I guess he will"

"You been promisin' to go fishin' with me one time How bout you spendin' the night with Ma and me and we ll go fishin' in the mornin' and I ll git you home fore your daddy finds out which side o' the river you're visitin'"

Piety urged her "You come spend the night now, Ardis. Lant s been wantin' you to visit the worst way"

She said after a moment, All right

At the house Lant walked aimlessly about, fol'owing Ardis from the front room to the kitchen and back again The strangeness of her presence there was overwhelming

Piety said, 'Don t you try to he'p me. I ll fix us a bite o' supper You jest set by the fire '

She sat in Piety's rocker and held the yellow cat Lant brought out his box of alligator teeth He showed her how they replenished themselves, new ones forming constantly, the new teeth nested inside the old

"Alligators has lots o' use for teeth," he told her earnestly, "and the Lord takes keer o' the sons o' bitches '

He brought out hides and rattlesnake skins. She touched them gingerly It delighted him to see her finger dart at them and away again He left her and went to the kitchen for a bottle of wine. He leaned over Piety at the cook-stove.

He whispered in her ear, "Ma, ain't my girl sweet?"

She said loyally, 'She's jest mighty sweet" She looked at him "She won't think you're sweet, and the smut not even washed off you"

He said, 'Great God!" and made for the wash basin

It was after ten o'clock when they finished supper and Piety made up the small bed in the front room She put a new sheet on the bottom and a clean quilt for cover She brought out a clean flannel nightgown of her own and held it up

'You one o' the few runty enough to git into this," she said

Lant went into his room so that the women could undress by the fire After his mother's door had closed and the creaking of the bed in the front room stopped, he opened his door a crack

He whispered, "Good night, Ardis"

Her voice came small and delicious from her bed

'Good night, Lant"

Then it was morning Ardis and Piety were up ahead of him, and the smell of coffee and bacon drifted across the breezeway Piety was at the side of the bed, bringing him clean clothes.

XXV

LANT poled the rowboat by a short-cut to the river. Even in the bright November morning the way was gloomy, overhung with writhing black rattan The ash and palms and cypress reared directly from the swamp water, their bases knotted in a torment of escape Where a bar of sunlight came through the dense foliage, Lant pointed out to Ardis a water moccasin on a log It was in the act of swallowing a frog The frog was croaking lustily The girl watched big-eyed, shrinking a little to the far side of the boat.

Piety said, laughing, 'Listen to him squall and beller!'

'The frog s too big for the moccasin," Lant said 'He cain't git him swallered nor he cain t turn him loose"

He tried to pry out the frog with the end of an oar, but the pair slid under the water The sunlight was blinding on the river as they swung into the current from the creek Swamp laurel and holly leaves glistened in the sun

Piety said, 'I love the river, but I don t perticKler love the swamp Hit s like travellin thu Hell to git to Heaven"

Lant paddled down stream with one oar, sitting in the stern seat of the rowboat The muscles of his long arms were tough and stringy Up or down the swift current, it made no difference to him His mother sat contentedly hunched over in the bow Ardis sat between

'You figger you'll go to Hell, Ardis?' he asked

She laughed 'I never thought about it'

"Since all the laws come in," he said, "I reckon we'll all

go And won t the ol devil have a picnic when all us folks gits there! He ll have a pure fish fry'

Piety chuckled from the bow, her chin in her hands

The best bream holes were in back waters of the river, around sunken logs and fallen tree tops, or where the creeks flowed out between lily pads to join the current They fished with tiny hooks and bonnet worms and long bamboo poles for the smaller the bream, the better to the taste of the big bass They caught a baker s dozen of red breasts, from two to five inches long, put them in a bucket of fresh water to keep them alive, and turned back into the broadest of the creeks for Lant to set his lines

He turned the boat over to Piety to paddle and directed her to places along the bank where ash saplings grew thickly He drew up here and there and cut half a dozen, fifteen feet long and an inch or two in thickness These he interspersed along the creek edge on the shady side, driving each sapling firmly into the muck so that it leaned over a dark pool He measured heavy twine to reach from the top of the sapling to the surface of the creek water On the end of the twine he noosed two heavy hooks, one hook put through the back of a live bream The bream swam in a semi-circle, his backbone a fan reaching just out of the water He made a tempting bass bait

Ardis said, 'This is lots of fun"

They paddled up and down the creek visiting the lines in turn Sometimes they had no more than turned their backs on a freshly baited line when they heard a bass strike. He made a wild commotion Sometimes he broke loose and got away, hooks, bream and all When he was hooked, he thrashed on the line so that the ash sapling bent and swayed Lant did not return to his first line when he heard a strike behind him Piety said, 'You better go back," but he was intent on the line ahead When he made his round again, he found a ten pound bass dead on the

line Its sides were slashed as though a jagged knife had hacked at them A small alligator had sampled the meat

Lant said, "He better git back in his winter quarters I'll come up with him one o' these nights"

Several small bass were ambitious and hooked them selves These Lant removed carefully, so as not to tear their mouths or gill them, and dropped them in the creek to swim away He talked to them as he worked at the hook

'You git you some size 'fore you come messin' up with me' He took over the paddling again

He shot the boat up and down the creek with strong strokes His lank body doubled up over the paddle. Some times he sent the boat under a tangle of briers, and Piety in the bow protested his roughness

"I got to git there, he said 'What kin I do?'

"You kin pull up a leetle shorter," she complained

When the boat passed near Sunday Bluff she turned excitedly

I smell male hog! she cried out

"Oh, your ol male hog You won t never see him agin'

Ardis looked from one to the other The older woman's vehemence puzzled her

She asked, What s the matter?"

Piety lamented her lost hogs at a moment's notice 'Why, half breed Tine has been hog stealin' around here the past two yare. Between him and the 'gators, you cain t raise you *no hogs for market We're doin' good to git down our* own meat."

Lant said, 'I'm about to catch up with the Half-breed If I comes up on him tomorrer mornin', I'll cut his throat from ear to ear before night fall"

Piety said, "You better not go on that-a way You ll find yourself in trouble. The law's gittin' mighty troublesome."

Lant said, "The law cain't do nothin' to you for lookin' out for your prop'ty The law looks out for folkses' prop'ty"

Piety said, "Don't you go countin' on the law. Hit ain't on the side o' the pore man"

They had been a little late in getting out the set lines Lant had tried to reach the creek at south moon over, but the moon was an hour past the meridian when they began to work the lines The catch was only four fish They were the true big mouthed bass, and they weighed from four to ten pounds apiece Lant took down his lines but left the saplings for another time He paddled down the creek to his landing while Piety untied the hooks and put them carefully away

Lant tied the rowboat to a small cypress Ardis put her hand on the tree to steady herself

He called anxiously, "Look out for that red cypress gum It'll purely blister your skin"

Piety said, "Hit's a hide raiser, all right, but they says it'll cure the cancer"

[illegible] al a ways and [illegible]

She took the string of fish from him

"You want Ardis should go with you?" she asked

"I thought I'd show her them two big hickories"

"They're somethin' to see, all right," she agreed

She started up the ledge, her thin shoulders stooped, her stick like legs pushing against the slope She turned

"Don't cut the cabbage too close to the swamp, for it'll be bitter"

Lant and Ardis went along the trail together He carried his light axe over one shoulder His gait, disjointed and awkward in a square-dance, fitted itself to the rough path like a stream flowing over stones He was dark and vital, like the hammock and the swamp Something stirred across the girl, as though a strong breeze blew suddenly across

a shallow pond When she stumbled in her thin shoes, she caught at him and then left her arm in his

She asked, "Lant, how do you make your living?"

He thought, 'I ll take her to the outfit"

He imagined her sitting on the platform under the sweet-gums, her hair as bright as the copper of the pot, while he explained the workings of the still

She added, "Father and Cousin Bill were asking me."

He stiffened He checked himself from blurting out, "It s none of their damn business" He thought, "I been at it a year and a half, and Bill Mersey ain t on to what I m doing yet? And him snooping around asking questions all the time"

He said casually, 'Oh, winter-times I trap, and summer-times I 'gator I farm and I hunt and I raft and do all sich as that I made a right smart piece o' money oncet, sendin' black haw roots to a drug comp'ny They paid twenty cents a pound"

She said, 'You must have sold almost every different kind of thing there is in the scrub to sell"

"I ve done sold live rattlesnakes," he admitted

He forgot his anger at Bill Mersey and warmed to the subject of rattlesnakes

"The last I caught," he told her, "Cleve and me come up on a pair in the south-east fence corner I stayed with 'em whilst Cleve goed to the house and fetched back a barrel and sack and fish poles with loops on 'em We stepped plenty lively gittin' em looped and the barrel over 'em and them in it. But we got four dollars apiece for them"

"Is that a good price?"

"Mighty good. You cain't git that money now The snake-man to Eureka ain t payin' but fifty cents a foot. I'll not hunt 'em for that"

He held a wild grape vine aside for her

"The risk's worth somethin'," he told her, "the same as the snake"

He was astonished that she knew none of the trees of the hammock except the magnolia and the holly He pointed them out and described their peculiarities, so that she would surely know them again Red bay and sweet bay, sweet gum and ironwood— She followed his finger with her grave eyes He stopped in his tracks and looked at her

"What's wild mulberry good for? he asked her sternly.

"Why—I suppose the birds eat the fruit"

"They ain't no finer wood in the world for oar lock blocks,' he informed her solemnly

Every tree fitted into his life Its beauty and its purpose were joined together, so that the most beautiful trees to him were those with the greatest use For the slim white ash trees he felt a tenderness, gauging their probable length in terms of strands for firing in the furnace of his still Near the Twin Sinks he led her up the ledge to the two giant hickories He walked around and around them, warming to their straightness and good grain

"They's hundreds o' feet o' timber in each o' them hickories," he said proudly 'I don't aim to cut 'em lest I got it to do Trees like that is scarce"

She tipped her head back and stared submissively at the tops, where the leaves hung golden against the blue translucent sky

Below the hickories again, where the hammock merged with swamp, he cut a low growing palmetto He trimmed down the ivory cylinder that was the heart of the palm and cut a shaving from the lower end, where the fan like sections fitted intricately together They tasted it It was crisp and sweet, like chestnuts

'That's a swamp cabbage that's fitten," he decided

He dropped it on a clean palmetto frond and laid the axe beside it He began to scratch himself thoughtfully

'The red bugs and ticks is gittin' into me,' he said "You set and rest whilst I dig the boogers out"

He rolled up his sleeves to the shoulder and investigated the length of each arm He came to her where she sat with her back against a magnolia and showed her the microscopic mites and ticks She could not make them out on his brown arm until he traced their movement with the tip of his pocket knife

"Them things gives me the devil," he said. "They don't bother Ma nary a mite."

He sat beside her and pulled up his trousers and bent to the same business about his ankles, bare of socks above his shoe-tops

'I reckon I got 'em all 'fore they got too deep buried If I ain t, I'll know it tonight"

He turned to her

They gittin' into you?

"I don't feel anything I got red bugs at a picnic at Orange Springs once, but I don t feel anything now"

Lemme see"

He turned her arm, bare under short sleeves, to the sunlight sifting through the magnolia

God A'mighty, you 'bout covered That's one thing I got agin hammock'

He bent earnestly and picked at her arm with his knife-point He drew his hand against the skin and examined it closely again

"Reckon I got 'em routed on that un Gimme 'tother arm"

He leaned across her and picked with a complete absorption in his work, turning her arm this way and that. Suddenly he was weak and a little sick The white flesh had changed under his touch It was electric. It was soft, so soft it frightened him A hot wave passed through him, and then he was cold It was like malaria, but more terri-

fying He wanted to look at her but he was afraid to lift his head He dropped his pocket knife and turned his head and rested his face against her throat Her pulse beat rapidly, like a bird's He held his breath Slowly, as though a magnolia petal drifted down to him, she laid her cheek on his and he felt her eyelids flutter there like moth-wings

There was no more hammock, no more swamp Nothing existed that had ever been before There was only a soft pulsing under his lips and a magnolia petal against his cheek It came to him like a revelation that he would kiss her Her lips were cool and remote, as though he pressed a guava against his mouth Then he was flooded with warmth Her lips were warm, and all the torment that sometimes possessed him pushed against her mouth, like a man beating against a closed door

He said, 'Ardis honey, you so sweet"

She put the back of her hand across her lips

She said, 'I m afraid

The torment left him, and he was half sick because he had frightened her Her hands were cold and he rubbed them until the tips of the fingers were pink again The sun stood at its zenith, but a chill November wind crossed the swamp and moved up the hammock ledge, rattling the thick leaves of the magnolia

She said, 'Let's go back"

He lifted her to her feet and picked up his axe and the white shaft of palm heart He wanted to take her hand, or put his free arm around her, but he walked stiffly beside her, looking ahead After a while she put her arm through his and rubbed her face against his sleeve

He said, 'Honey, I jest ain't goin' to put my arm around you 'til you say so"

She said, 'I say so"

They laughed and walked close together along the trail

and through the hammock and across the clearing Piety looked at them curiously

She said, 'Hit's too late to cook the cabbage for dinner, if you're takin' Ardis home soon like you said Dinner's on the table."

In the early afternoon Lant rowed Ardis down the river to Iola Landing He let the boat drift and she sat on the floor between his knees and leaned against him The sun was warm and the river was brown velvet flecked with gold When he drew her body closer and brushed his face across her hair and felt her throat with his fingers, a sharp sadness struck him In the spring he had seen a red-bird singing from a wild plum tree white with bloom The bird had almost instantly flown away, because the moment was too beautiful to endure

XXVI

Lant was in Eureka the day before Thanksgiving

The storekeeper said, "Your Uncle Abner left word for you to come out to his place and see him, the next time you were here"

He said, "I figgered on gittin' right home with my sugar. Did he say what-all he wanted?"

"He didn't say, but I imagine it's something about the cattle trouble."

"The Streeters raisin' Hell agin?"

"They penned half a dozen of Eph Wilson's yearlings last week The way Abner spoke, I believe they got a bunch of his cattle this time"

Lant said, "Them damn Yankees better look out. Uncle Ab don't allow nobody to mess up with his prop'ty."

The storekeeper laughed

"Lant, I'm a Yankee because I came from Massachusetts The Streeters don't like the name. They claim men from Arkansas are Westerners."

"Hell," he grinned amiably, "you all the same. You all ol' furriners."

He had better see Abner, he decided. His rowboat was tied at Eureka bridge. He carried his sugar on his back and loaded it in and rowed down-stream and stopped on the piney-woods side and tied up He walked through the woods to Abner's house. He had wondered how long the trouble could go on before the Streeters were jerked up with a short rope. They were comparative newcomers, farming in a cattle section, and from the first they had

failed to mind their own business as was seemly for strangers to do

The section had been always "open range" Miles of unfarmed, often ownerless land, valueless for crops, grew a lush growth of a coarse grass that fattened the free ranging scrub-cattle without further feeding As far back as Lant could remember—within his mother's memory, too —the poorest Crackers in the section had had their small herds ranging free The more prosperous families were all cattle people Abner had a thousand head in the woods Each fall the herd, fat from the summer grazing, was driven in, the spring calves branded and the desirable beef animals sold for butchering

Until the past year, Lant realized, there had been no question of fencing in the cattle If a man had a field of corn or sugar-cane, a patch of peanuts or sweet potatoes, he threw a fence around it as a matter of course, to keep out stock, his own and that of his neighbours But hard roads had replaced three of the old dirt wagon roads in the section, and auto traffic was coming through at a fast clip as far east as Eureka It encountered herds of cattle, feeding along the shoulders of the roads, crossing from one side to the other, and slumbering placidly in the middle. Echoes of an urban outcry against the situation had reached the river Lant had seen a newspaper from a town some thirty miles away, complaining of the savagery of cattle loose on the highways Then, a few months ago, a distant legislature had closed the range. A man who owned cattle must keep them under fence, or be liable to damages if his stock strayed A man finding stock on his land was legally privileged to impound them and to collect a generous fee for his trouble

Lant remembered that Abner had said at first that the new law would make very little difference Like the game and whiskey laws, he hoped that things would run by tacit

consent much as they had run before Almost every man in the section had stock that brought him in his chief cash income Almost no one could afford to fence miles of pasture There was no one to protest the free passage of cattle True, the owner of stock was now liable for damages if a car struck one of his cows on a highway, but Abner believed the county itself would soon build fences along the county roads Now the Streeters were intruding violently on the community agreement They were impounding cattle with a reckless abandon

Lant found Abner at his cane mill, oiling the gears after the season's grinding Old man Lonny Sours was with him Abner swung his big stomach around, the oil can in his hand

He said, "Hey, son"

"Hey, Uncle Ab Hey, Lonny"

Abner said, "Looks like I'm 'bout to git you into another job like that one six seven years ago with that Alabamy feller '

"That's about the way I figgered," Lant said

They sat down on the cold brick furnace around the syrup kettle

Abner asked, "Them damn Streeters been over on your side the river?"

"Now, Uncle Ab, I cain't rightly say Monday, I believe 'twas, I was runnin' a charge and I thought I heered men hollerin' and a sound like cattle bein' drove into the river. I wa'n't in no shape to go messin' up with nobody. I jest laid low"

Abner said, "That was them, all right Four of them pieded cows from the scrub herd was in with the bunch of mine them buzzards had penned yestiddy" He spat. "Claimin' the cattle come acrost their land—huh."

Old man Sours said, "Eph Wilson was comin' down the back road Sat'day last, jest about dusk-dark, and he seed the

Streeters drivin' four five cows and calves, a good mile 'fore you git to their line Eph said they jumped in the bushes and let the cattle go on and he never could find the men"

"Eph Wilson—huh! He never looked too long Huh"

Lant asked, "What the Streeters gittin' out of it, besides the *pure devilment?*"

"Hell, they gittin' their fees for impoundin', pay for keepin' the creeters And they tryin' to farm in a cattle country, and they figger they got the new law to he'p 'em"

Old Sours said, "But Ab, they got no right to interfere with folkses' livin'"

Abner said judiciously, "I ain't sayin' they got the right to do what they're doin' The law's the law, and the law s always changin', but they's things beyond the law is right and wrong, accordin' to how many folks they he'ps or harms. I'm jest answerin' Lant's question, What is the Streeters gittin' out o' this?"

Sours said, "'Twouldn t be so bad if they didn't leave the cattle go *hongry* and thirsty in the pen the way they done my milch-cow Nor if they wa'n't drivin' in cattle from nowheres near their land Nor if they hadn't acted so big gety, 'stead o' comin' to ever'body and askin' would we he'p 'em fence."

"What you tryin' to git at, Lonny," Abner said, "is, 'twouldn't be so bad if the Streeters wa'n't jest low-down, ornery Arkansas bastards"

Lant said, "I got to git goin', Uncle Ab You wastin' my time, if *you got me here jest to say you kin count on me* You knowed that"

Abner said, "I don't never like to take nothin' for granted I'm givin' [illegible]
to go at this thing [illegible]
ride range on my c [illegible]
to git me word ary day my stock was on his land and I d have 'em drove off We'll jest see. You done a good job

for me when you was a knob jointed, long-coupled young scaper, and I don't want you to miss no fun now you're a growed man I ll git you and Zeke the word if the need come"

Lant went to the house to pass the time of day with Abner's wife, and then rowed home with his sugar.

A week later Cleve came to him in late afternoon at his still in the swamp

Cleve said, 'Come ahead, Mister."

"Streeters been at it agin, eh?'

'I mean Penned a hull heap o' Uncle Ab's stock the day after Thanksgiving Kep' 'em penned and never got Ab word and dogged if the sheriff didn't come today and hold a sale Cost Uncle Ab 'bout two hundred dollars to bid 'em in and pay costs"

You been to git Zeke?"

'He s waitin' at Otter Landin'"

The three men crossed the river by rowboat At Abner Lantry's place they found gathered some twenty men from the vicinity They were waiting for dark, for there was no need to be recognized There was a little discussion as to whether a preliminary warning to the Streeters was necessary They agreed it was not

Abner said, "I warned 'em ten days ago Them scoundrels knowed the fust time they done it, hit were wrong, messin' up in other folkses' business No use to do nary thing now but jest cold-out show 'em we'll not have it"

Under his silver grey hair he was red faced and sweating.

"Men,' he said, 'I jest as soon make this my business, if you say so Man to man, me and the Streeters"

They thought the proposition over in silence

Ase Wilson said at last, 'Seems to me they've done harmed us all They'll make trouble for the hull passel of us right on Hit'll have more weight, like, more circumstance, do right smart of us whop it to 'em"

Old Jacklin spat the width of the Lantry porch and said, "Hit'll skeer 'em into mindin' their manners more to have twenty men put the strop to 'em easy, than for one man to fram the chitlin's plumb outen 'em."

When dark came the group set off down the lonely road towards the Streeter place in three old Ford cars. The piney woods roads all looked the same in the night, their shallow ruts over grown with grass, swerving erratically to avoid ancient stumps. The men drove with dimmed lights, but no one passed to see them. They stopped a hundred yards from the Streeter house and crept close in a semi circle. The two Streeter men sat on the porch. The glow from their pipes showed their position. A kerosene light flickered from the kitchen, where their wives moved in a light clatter of supper dishes.

Abner said in a low voice, "A'right," and they moved to the porch. There was no hurry and they made no noise. The Streeters fought desperately, but a power as slow and deep as the river current laid itself on them, and they were no longer men, but trussed and frightened bundles. The cattle men dumped them in the two lead cars. The women came running to the porch. One held the kerosene lamp high over her head, her face drawn and puzzled in its glare. They screamed and ran after the cars. One of them looked Lant square in the face as she came up. The three cars ground off into the darkness.

Abner led the way to the swamp. The car lights were switched off and the Streeters were stripped in the dark to their waists. They were laid together across a fallen log and held at heads and feet. Each man in the gathering took his turn at the whipping. A piece of leather harness strap was used. The Streeters cried out and big hands covered their mouths in the darkness to muffle the sound. The whipping was dispassionate and thorough. It had been agreed to keep silence, but when Ase Wilson's turn

came, he was excited He brought down the strap in a burst of anger

'Pen stock, will you!" he cried

For terror, the Streeters did not move when the group had finished When the sound of the cars died away, they broke free from their loose trussing and found their way home

Abner and the Wilsons and the rest agreed that it was a good job done

"Them low down sorry varmints ll mebbe set down now and behave theirselves," they said

Two days later the high sheriff and a swarm of deputies drove through the piney woods serving warrants One of the Streeter women had seen Lant's face distinctly She did not know him by name, since he had never been a frequent visitor across the river She looked in vain for him among the youths of her neighbourhood The Streeter men had heard one voice Ase Wilson s in the darkness, but could not place it They were all eyes and ears to locate the one face and the one voice Meanwhile, they swore wholesale to warrants, naming Abner Lantry, Cleve Jacklin, the Wilson tribe and half the population of the piney woods as the whippers

The river folk were aghast Insult had been added to injury They had given the law no trouble in their history They had settled their own disputes among themselves, decently and quietly When a man was found to be abusing his woman or his children, they had not bothered the sheriff nor called for a court They had waited on the offending citizen and induced him, in one manner or another, to see the error of his ways.

When Jake Tanner felt sorry for the widow Lane and her six fatherless children and offered them all the shelter of his home, the community had waited a year for him to marry her. When he did not do so, they called in a body,

a preacher in their midst, and informed him that for the sake of the common decency, the marriage must take place Jake reported later that the wedding had put him in the widow s bed where he had not been before and had no intention of going but the proprieties were served

On the rare occasions when a man was caught stealing, or lying to another s harm, he was dealt with as the Streeters had been, and the offender and the community were the better and the more peaceful for the settling of the matter They knew what they would tolerate and what they would not The Streeters had offended in the most grievous manner possible Strangers they had interfered with the community s living And now the law upheld them The county was backing up the Streeters The county and the Streeters intended to send Abner and the Wilsons and other respectable citizens to Raiford prison, or even to Atlanta penitentiary

Old man Lonny Sours said I never figgered I d live to see the day But you don t never know the luck of a lousy calf

Lant went with Abner to the county seat one Saturday Abner was talking with his lawyer and Lant walked idly about the town square He met two men from a neigh bouring county who sometimes hunted in the scrub and bought whiskey of him He glanced up from his conver sation John Streeter s wife was staring at his red forelock, hanging from under his black slouch hat By the time he had placed the woman in his memory, she had darted into the court house and was approaching the group with

woman swore to a positive identification

Abner went bond for Lant, as he had done for every one except the Wilsons, who were able to write their own

After conference with Lant's astonished acquaintances, and with his lawyer, Abner left the two in jail for a few days, for a purpose that at once occurred to him He had drawn out money from his postal savings account and had counted the gold and silver buried under his rear stoop Now he named to his attorney the amount he was willing to spend

"If the Streeters wants law," he said, "by God, we'll give 'em law Take the case to Tallahassee," he ordered, his big face florid and intent "Take hit to Washin'ton to the pres-eye-dent Take hit so fur them sons o' bitches 'll be pantin' for water and their tick bit tails torn and hangin'

"Hit's a question," he added, "who's got the cash money to hang on the longest, them or me The longest pole reaches the persimmon"

XXVII

THE trial of the cattle men was set for the first spring term of court It seemed to Lant the winter would never be done with He was restless At his distilling he jumped like a cat at every sound Zeke visited him occasionally in the swamp, unable to conceal his delight at being out of the trouble When Zeke had gone again, Lant thought so fiercely about the Streeter business that he forgot Ardis

Sometimes when he went to see her, the delicious closeness was gone and he came away in despair He kept away from her as long as he could Then the thought of her blended with his old torment. There was no more peace until he had rowed across the river to sit beside her at the Mersey hearth and perhaps, if she was in the mood, walk with her down the road and hold her desperately close, kissing her eyes and mouth and throat The actual touch of her, cool and always faintly withdrawn, relieved his feverishness, as a little water quenches the worst of thirst When he was away from her, the yellow hair seemed brighter, the unsmiling eyes warmer, the thin mouth and body inviting, even yielding

Piety asked him, 'You think Ardis'll have you?"

He said, "I think she'll have me. I aim to git it settled, time this cattle mess is over" He added, "If I gits out with a whole hide" He laughed shortly "Here I been worryin' 'bout the moonshine business and then gits into deep water 'bout other folkses' cattle."

She said, "You had to he'p Abner"

"Oh, I ain't begrudgin' bein' in on it Hit jest make me think the only thing do go right for me, is the whiskey"

'I cain t he'p lettin' it worry me right on"

'Bless Katy, Ma, you got you a decent livin' the first time since I been makin one The Prohis ain't goin' to come up with me 'less it's pure acceedent, and now you complainin'"

I ain t complainin'"

She studied him, as she had once studied Lantry Her stream of life had joined her son's, she thought, and was indistinguishable from it She could conceive of no trouble that was not his trouble, no grief that was not his grief Because his dark face was drawn, and the red-brown eyes a little sunken over the square cheekbones, she hoped the girl Ardis would come to him when he was ready for her Abner had assured Piety that her son had nothing to fear from the trial, and she believed him If worst came to worst, he told her, he would take the whole thing on himself

Lant had money ahead at Christmas. He asked Kezzy's advice about a present for Ardis Sears Roebuck had a fine pair of ladies' hunting boots that appealed to him Kezzy sighed

'Lant, if 'twas me, tromping thu the bogs and all over the way I do, it'd be different You git that girl a double compact"

He was inclined to take offense at the suggestion

She said tactfully, 'You want her to know you think she's pretty, don't you? Nothin' don't please a young girl more than somethin' to use to make her pretty Somethin' to put on her face or hair, or perfume to smell sweet on her" She blinked her eyes quickly She said, choking a little, "I kin remember yit how tickled I were when Cleve come from the dime-store one day with a ol' shiny pin to stick in my hair"

He said, "Kezzy, look at me Is Cleve workin'?"

She shook her head

"Uncle Ab quit ridin' range on his herd mighty nigh a month ago,' he commented "Ain't Cleve done nothin' since then?"

'No"

How you makin' out?"

'We makin' out all right I butchered six hogs and I got my garden and my chickens and my own meal and 'taters"

'You fixin' to have another young un, ain't you?'

'Lant, I swear you the nosiest somebody"

"Somebody got to keep track of you Cleve ain't doin' it"

She was silent

He was buying parts to make a small radio for his mother for Christmas, he told her

She said, "That ain't as bad as the huntin' boots for Ardis Your mother's eyes is got to be so bad, I reckon it'll pleasure her to set and listen to a radio '

"What you want for Christmas, Kezzy?"

"I want a gallon o' your best 'shine, dogged if I don't. Time you drink some good 'shine, you don't notice if you've got nothin' else '

Abner and his wife had invited Cleve and Kezzy for Christmas dinner Zeke and his wife were coming to Piety for the day

Lant suggested, "How 'bout the day after Christmas, you and Cleve bring Ardis over in the evenin' and set and listen to the radio? I kin take Ardis home agin"

She laughed "Got that part all figgered out, ain't you? Why yes, that'd be mighty nice."

He went away and she waved after him, smiling

On Christmas morning Piety said dubiously of the radio, "I reckon I'll git used to it." The raucousness of the human voices distressed her and she did not like the music as well

as Lant's banjo She would rather have had curtains for the windows, she thought She had never had any, and the shades Willy Jacklin had bought her twenty years before hung over the small panes in ribbons Yet the old shingled roof leaked so badly that there would be no use in putting up curtains even if Lant would buy them When it rained, she tugged the piles of heavy quilts from one room to another, and back again When the rain was heavy enough the high peaked roof was no better than a sieve and the quilts got wet in spite of her Perhaps another year Lant would re shingle the roof and then she could have curtains

She spent the morning after Christmas cleaning the house because Ardis was coming She scrubbed the old pine floors until they were the colour of Jersey cream She put fresh crimped paper over the mantel She cut a picture from a magazine Lant had brought home from one of the hunting camps and pinned it on the board wall between a 'gator hide and his rifle. The fur company s calendar hung on the kitchen door The cover this year was hand some Lant still kept a few traps going through the win ter season She looked about The Merseys had always had plenty to do with

She said, 'I wisht I had me a good house with somethin' in it, and then keep it nice '

Lant said absently, 'This un's good enough"

She looked at him critically He was ready to go to the still His blue chambray shirt was ragged and he wore a cloth cap that was no more than a visor His red-brown hair hung in back from under the naked band and stuck in straight spikes through the remnants of the front He was most contented, she thought, when his elbows stuck out of his sleeves and his ribs showed white through long cool gashes in his shirt.

She said, 'I jest as good to hold my breath, for you don t keer what you wear You'll go to the outfit in a new shirt

or new breeches and come back plumb ragged and better satisfied"

"I'll put on a white shirt this evenin'," he said

"If 'twa'n't for Ardis, you'd go this a way all the time"

"I had me a white shirt 'fore I ever knowed her"

"Yes, and put it on mighty seldom"

She reached behind him and picked off the fragment of cap from his head and moved quickly to the hearth and threw it on the fire.

"I'll jest not look at that thing no longer"

He was forced to take from its hook the black felt that had been his Sunday best since he had been grown Its wide brim annoyed him He slapped it on the back of his head and went to his work

He found one barrel of mash ready to run and decided not to risk waiting for the next barrel He was out of ash and had to take time to cut fresh wood It was after dark when he came to the house and Cleve and Kezzy and Ardis were ahead of him He came in whistling On his big head was perched the crown of the black felt hat

Piety asked, exasperated, 'Now where's the brim?'

"I made me a lantern wick outen the brim,' he said complacently 'That a way I got me a extry benefit"

He washed and went to his room and put on clean clothes Piety and Kezzy were talking in the bedroom where Kezzy had put the baby to sleep and Cleve was in the smoke house getting a drink Ardis stood alone in front of the hearth He came from his room and stood beside her and watched her gravely He said, "Le's go walk a piece" and took her arm and led her from the house and down the lane.

Piety said, "Kezzy, I'm like not to git a chancet with you alone agin What you think of Lant's girl?"

"Well, I wouldn't say it to nobody but you—nor to you, if you hadn't asked me. Aunt Py-tee, she ain't got too

much sense She's pretty and soft like I reckon that's all a man wants"

The older woman said stoutly, "Well, 'tain't all a man needs Pertickler a man fixed like Lant She's too fine haired That's what she is"

'It's his business, Aunt Py tee"

Cleve came in and in a short while Lant and Ardis were back again Lant had little to say

Piety said, 'You've had no supper, Lant. Don't you want somethin'?"

He said, I reckon"

They followed him to the kitchen and sat around the table while Piety gave him a cold supper.

She asked, 'Cain t the rest of you eat?"

Cleve poked in the dish of meat

'Any squirrel meat in here?"

Lant said, 'I ain t shot none all week, Cleve It's been blowin' too hard for 'em"

Ardis said brightly, 'I suppose their tails are so big they can't balance when it blows"

Kezzy said, 'I hope I ain't got to take to stayin' in on windy days"

Lant heard Ardis catch her breath He looked at her She stared wide-eyed at Kezzy, picking a chicken wing, and flushed She dropped her eyes and twisted her fingers in her lap

Lant said sharply, "Kezzy, you quit talkin' so rough" He added, "Ardis ain't used to it"

"Ain't she? Mebbe you and I kin learn her somethin' she don't know"

Piety brushed some crumbs from the worn oilcloth cover on the table. Ardis watched her furtively.

Piety said, "I've got a white cloth"

'It's a good time to think of it," Lant said.

Kezzy's black eyes were on the girl

She said hotly, "Oilcloth's good enough for anybody, I don't keer who 'tis"

Piety agreed, "I've always thought it was good enough"

Zeke Lantry called from the front door They left the kitchen and went in by the hearth fire Zeke had slipped away from his wife to hear the radio Lant sat by it and turned the dials He stole a look now and then at Ardis, sitting stiffly between Kezzy and his mother The girl's face was pale and clear beside the weather-beaten and serviceable hide that was his mother's skin Ardis was no fairer than Kezzy Or perhaps Kezzy's skin seemed so milk white against the smooth blackness of her eyes and hair

The radio was a disappointment Its irritations outweighed its pleasures The static was bad

Lant said, "It sounds like a dirt-dauber in a tin can"

For a little time he had a jug band coming in Many of the tunes were familiar A stringed orchestra played sweetly and they listened with a deep pleasure Suddenly a man's voice broke in harshly

Piety shrilled indignantly, "Now that jessie had to put his bill in it!'

The stringed orchestra disappeared entirely and a 'blues" singer began to wail He lamented, "Why was I ever born?' They chuckled

"He's in a bad fix," Kezzy said

They were amused by the sorrowful songs that whimpered through the home made loud speaker After a time Zeke shuffled his feet and spat in the fireplace

"Lant," he said, "turn that thing off and git out your banjo Hit's a sight better'n that mess"

Piety said with enthusiasm, 'That's what I say"

Lant clicked off the radio and brought his banjo from Piety's trunk. He sat by the fire and tuned it, his ear against the strings. Zeke looked hopeful, and Lant played

his uncle's favourite piece, "Come all you Georgia boys" Zeke clapped his hands as Lant played and sang in his high nasal whine

'Come all you Georgia boys and listen to my noise
Don t be deceived by the Deep Creek boys
For if you do, your portion it will be,
Workin' in the cypress swamps is all you can see'

There was a Deep Creek, north of the scrub, that flowed into the Ocklawaha Zeke did not know whether that was the one named in the song, or not A song was a song, and it made no difference where it came from

"Go over to your neighbour s house, they'll set you out a chair
First thing you hear Daddy killed a bear'
Draw up to the fire place pass the 'baccy 'roun'
'Mama, ain't youn johnny-cake bakin' too brown?'

"They'll go off to dress and put on their best—
Daddy s ol huntin shirt—for that is their best.
Ol sock leg they wear the winter 'roun',
Ol palmetto hat, more rim than crown

'They go to the cow-pen and milk in a gourd,
Set it in the jamb and kiver it with a board.
That is the way they used for to do—
For I was raised in the backwoods too!'

Zeke listened to the words as intently as though he had never heard them before He slapped his leg and shook his head and gave his sister a push

"Ol' palmetto hat, more rim than crown, eh, Py tee?"

She said, laughing, "Don't th'ow off on a palmetto hat to me I got one on the nail right on"

There was no question about it. A banjo playing the

old pieces had more satisfaction in it than all the radios in the county

Zeke went home early for fear his wife would follow him

Lant said bluntly, 'I better git you home, Ardis. Let's go"

When he had gone with the girl, Piety said, "What you reckon ails him?'

Kezzy shook her head

"I cain't quite figger First I thought things jest wa'n't goin' right between the two of 'em, but I got a idee they's more to it than that"

Cleve stretched his legs to the fire. He said sleepily, 'I been hearin' tell Tom and Bill Mersey is right thick with the Streeters '

Kezzy said, 'I hated to say it"

Lant was home from the river in a short time Cleve and Kezzy were ready to go Kezzy was putting on her coat Lant stormed at her

"You wa'n't nice to my girl,' he raged. He turned to include his mother "Nor you neither You was both throwin' off on her I won't never take her around neither of you agin"

Piety put one hand half over her mouth and blinked her deep eyelids at him He pushed past Kezzy to the front room She followed him

She said, 'Lant—oh, Lant——"

He looked at her Her head was thrown back and her eyes were closed Her face was wax white, like a palm-heart Tears dropped slowly from under her long lashes She lifted her arms from her sides and dropped them hopelessly

She said, "I'd cut off my hands 'fore I'd mean to hurt you"

He remembered her hands the evening of the Big Burn

when she had rowed across the river with word for Ardis from him They had been blackened and raw He took them and turned them over They were square and strong The palms were healed

He said, "Kezzy, don't forgive me if it's too hard to do"

He tightened his hold and burst out, "I think I m 'bout to go crazy I don't know what all's the matter."

She said, 'I wisht I could he'p you."

XXVIII

THREE weeks before the trial, on the morning before the close of the legal deer season, Bill Mersey, the game warden, clicked the front gate of the Lantry clearing and walked up the fenced in lane. Two red and brown hounds strained ahead of him on a leash Piety saw him coming and hurried to Lant in the smoke house

Bill Mersey's comin to the house," she said

"They ain t much here to bother him, he commented

He looked up at the rafters where several year-old strips of jerked venison hung among the hams and bacons. He pulled them down and dropped them in a barrel in the corner and scattered a few ears of corn over the top They walked into the yard together to meet Bill

Lant said, 'He's likely jest passin' by and bringin' some word from Ardis He s a son of a bitch to be kin to her"

Hey, Bill"

Hey, Lant Howdy, Mis' Jacklin"

Bill was cordial

"What you think of my deer-dogs, Lant?"

'They look all right Kin they slow-trail?"

I came to see if you didn't want to hunt deer with me this morning and find out"

Lant hesitated He was not anxious to be seen in Bill s company The game warden was always vaguely a pariah in the section The man ahead of Bill had been corrupt. He had winked at fish-traps in the river-bed, at wild turkies in the oven in August, at fire-hunting by night, at the taking of doe-deer in season, or indeed of any deer

at any time The proper presents of liquor, the invocation of a relative's influence, were all that was necessary to have him look the other way Bill was reasonably honest He took his job seriously He was an object of profound mistrust

Lant wondered what Bill wanted

He said, 'Bill, I ain't shot no doe-deer nor scarcely no deer at all this winter, if you huntin' for somethin' more to git me to the court house"

Bill laughed heartily

'You don't think Ardis'd let me in the house if I was to make you any trouble, do you?"

Lant said, 'I don't know who she'd let in Times, I gits a idee she's 'bout not to let me in no more"

Bill said easily, "She's mighty sweet on you", and after a moment, 'How 'bout the huntin'?"

Lant said, 'Why, yes I ll go deer huntin' with you"

He took down his rifle from the wall and slipped extra cartridges in his buckskin hunting vest The two men walked down the lane together, the dogs snuffing at the path

Bill asked, "Any special deer run you know of, or good stand?"

Lant said, "You been in the scrub this winter more'n me, Bill You'd orter know I tell you what I think Leave the dogs slow trail north thu the upper hammock, see kin they jump a deer beddin' there I've seed plenty of sign Then if we don't jump one, work on up along the road The woods is so full o' hunters now, and dogs, we stand jest as good a chancet havin' 'em drive a deer right to us"

Bill released the hounds and they loped forward

Bill said, "It wasn't you, then, hung a fresh doe-skin on my gate last week?"

"You don't reckon I'd own to it, if 'twas, do you?' He

added, "No, by God, nor tell you who done it if I knowed that."

Bill said comfortably, "It was likely some shirt-tail boy, thought it was funny"

Lant guffawed.

"It ain't nothin' I'm fixin' to cry about, right now," he said.

The warden flushed

The deer season had been shortened this year, and the hunting camps in the scrub had doubled in number There was a desperate attempt to take the camp bag limit The night before, Piety, wakeful, had heard several cars grind by, the deep sand tearing at the labouring motors She had said to Lant at breakfast, "The pore deer'll ketch it today" North of the clearing the two men began to hear the sounds of a chase A pack of deer hounds and beagles yelped and bayed, and a hunting horn blew long and mournfully

Lant said, "Listen! The deer's makin' for the swamp" He began to run "Leave your dogs go We'll cut down and lay for the booger They's a trail all the deer's been takin' here lately"

They ran through the hammock and down the ledge to the swamp The dogs were coming closer The baying was deep and rich It rolled like the notes of an organ through the dark swamp Lant put Bill on a stand behind a clump of ash saplings at the swamp edge He pointed out the deer tracks in the black muck "Thick as a hog-trail," he whispered The swamp dissolved here in a shallow creek. Across the creek lay a narrow swampy island. Beyond the island was the river. If a deer made the swamp and the creek, it was usually safe. Occasionally a dog would swim the creek to the island, but from that point the hunted animal had no trouble in making the river, and no dog would brave its depth and current. Lant took a

stand above Bill, where swamp and hammock joined The dogs were yelping with sharp excited cries There was a dull thumping ahead, and two tawny bodies came slipping through the swamp with incredibly liquid motion Lant lifted his rifle and eased it down again The deer were an old doe and a maiden doe

If he had been alone, or with Zeke or Cleve, he would have shot the old doe and left the maiden to breed in the spring There were many old does, he knew, for whom there were no mates Bill Mersey called up to him 'Too bad' They watched the pair take the creek, so that only the smooth heads and great brown eyes were visible, scramble to their sharp feet and bound away across the island The dogs milled in a shrieking tumult at the creek edge and began to back track Three hunters came up

Bill said, "A pair of does"

One of the men said, "We've been on their trail since daylight Picked it up about five miles into the scrub We never even saw them I m having such rotten luck I d have had a shot, doe or no doe"

One of his companions recognized Mersey and ground his elbow in the speaker s ribs

Bill said, "Better luck next time"

The hunters blew in their dogs and cut wearily up the hammock Lant lifted his nose and sniffed at a taint on the air

He said, 'They's a dead deer on the island agir"

Bill said, "Let's go see"

Above the deer trail a log lay across the deep part of the creek They walked across it In the centre of the island lay the decaying carcass of a large buck Lant cut away the antlers and handed them to Mersey

Bill said, 'I ll take 'em to Ardis for you"

Scarcely a day passed during deer season, Lant knew, that a wounded animal did not slip through the swamp,

spattering the palmettos with its blood, swim the narrow creek and take harbour on the island If it recovered, it swam the river to the piney woods after night fall, or returned again into the scrub

He said, 'Dog take it, I got no use for buckshot Half the time the deer jest gits tore up and dies tedious, or don't even die I killed me a big ol' buck one year, had a game leg You could see where the buckshot had messed it up God know how long the creeter had laid up, and that thing a healin'"

"A rifle's more sporting, all right"

'With a rifle, you got a quick kill or a clean miss." He went on, 'If them scapers comes in here knowed how to track, they'd have no need to let the deer go off, like this un, and die this-a way They could foller and come up with it and git the good o' the hide and the meat"

But the hunters were not always good trackers, and the smell of carrion lay on the air and vultures wheeled above the swamp

'Understand me, Bill, I ain't begrudgin' 'em their game nor their pleasure'

He thought, indeed, they were welcome to a share in the scrub Except for the wanton wounding of deer, he minded only the noise they made. It fell offensively on ears accustomed to the soft sounds of birds and animals and river current He was conscious always of a musical rustling in the scrub, where pine needles brushed on pine boughs like small bows on infinitesimal fiddles On the stillest days, the tops of the trees stirred gently The voices of men drowned out the sound, as the cries of hawks obscured the thrush notes

The two men followed the swamp to the north

Bill said casually, "Your still anywheres around here?"

Lant's pulse jumped

He thought, 'I figured that was too fishy, you not knowing what I was doing"

He said, "No"

Bill let the subject drop They cut up through the hammock Across the road the dogs picked up a fresh trail leading into the scrub The warden followed with a detachment peculiar, Lant thought, to a man on a deer hunt They walked side by side.

Bill said, "It's too bad the Streeters got all you fellows into trouble"

Lant said, 'I reckon they figger they was pretty smart"

'I hope you get out of it all right It's got Ardis worried I don't think a jury ll convict you" He broke a twig of sweet myrtle and put it between his teeth "You goin' to plead guilty?'

Damn it, Bill, what you tryin' to find out? Snoopin' and pryin', and 'Ardis' this and Ardis' that"

'I'm not trying to find out a thing"

'Well, I tell what I got to tell, free—or I don't tell it You go on with your huntin' I m goin' back'

He turned and walked angrily back to the road Near the clearing he came across a lost dog He whistled to it and it followed him At the house he tied it and fed and watered it

"I ll find out where you come from, ol' feller," he said, "and git you home all right"

Dogs seemed to become bewildered in the scrub, he thought, by the same directionless confusion of pines that lost men Each season he found several after the hunters had departed, gaunt with starvation and thirst and half-wild with a dog's despair Piety came to the yard to look at the dog

She said, 'Where's Bill?"

"I let him go on Damned if he wa'n't tryin' to git some-

thin' on me Wanted I should come right out and say I was in on the whippin'"

'Lant, I m goin' to tell you what Cleve said the night after Christmas He said he d heerd tell the Merseys was in with the Streeters"

"I shouldn t wonder," he said He spat He said bitterly, 'Ma, I ain't too sure where Ardis stand"

She hesitated She said, 'Kezzy wouldn't want I should tell you this, but I m goin' to Kezzy said Ardis thought a heap of you, all right, but she s timid She's holdin' off, like, waitin' to see how the trial come out"

'That do me a heap o' good now, don t it?"

The court house was packed for the trial Sympathy was sharply divided Piety and Zeke and Kezzy sat together The early indictments had been pared down to eight in number Abner Lantry, Cleve and Lant Jacklin, three of the Wilsons, and the two men pointed out with Lant on the town square by Mrs John Streeter The woman had clung hysterically to her identifications

Abner breathed heavily but showed no distress Cleve licked his lips and turned his round pasty face furtively to look about the court room The Wilsons stirred nervously on their hard chairs Lant's two acquaintances lifted their eyebrows at each other Abner Lantry was paying them well for their passivity Lant stared ahead of him, his arms folded, his forelock low over his eyes

[illegible]

ants. The old man had a hazy conception of the business and was tremendously excited Kezzy motioned him to a seat beside her

The trial moved with startling speed Abner's lawyer had arranged that the first to be tried should be the pair

Mrs John Streeter had found with Lant on the town square Even the other defendants were not prepared for the strategy Mrs Streeter identified them, swore tremblingly that they were of the group that had borne off her husband

On cross-examination she insisted fervently that she was sure of her men

They were with the young man with the dark red hair in his eyes——"

'Never mind the young man with dark red hair You could not be mistaken as to these two men? Not possibly mistaken?"

She said firmly, 'I could not possibly be mistaken"

The attorney had kept the pair meekly in the back ground for a reason that became evident at once He had no diff [illegible] [illegible]ployed in anc[illegible] ping, [illegible] cept Lantry Jacklin, with whom they had twice hunted, had been in their own homes on the entire day and night of the whipping, and knew nothing of the affair until they read of it in a newspaper a week later When the Streeters identified the six other defendants with equal fervour, their oaths fell on the ears of a deaf jury

The Streeters' venom made an unfavourable impression On the morning of the fourth day of the trial, the jury retired to render its decision In the light of the completely mistaken identifications of the two men from another county, it admitted something more than a reasonable doubt in favour of the river men Somebody had assuredly administered to the Arkansas settlers a very thorough strapping, deserved or undeserved For fear of doing injustice to an innocent man, the jury refused to read guilt in the enigmatic faces. The verdict was the same for all eight defendants, "Not guilty"

Kezzy gripped Piety's hand

The older woman said, 'Abner tol' me we had nothin' to fear"

Cleve came down the aisle grinning broadly Abner's red face sweat and glowed He shook hands right and left with his friends The Wilsons shuffled their feet and were anxious to be gone Lant s face was set in hard lines Piety, watching him, thought she had never seen him look so blackly The Streeters were talking angrily Mrs John Streeter pointed a shaking finger at Lant and screamed across the intervening benches and tables

'That man was in the bunch, as Jesus Christ is my witness."

The words released an old, well-oiled spring in Ramrod Simpson He jumped up and down, his white hair fluttering, and out shrieked the Streeters.

'I knowed it!' he shouted 'I knowed ol' Desus Chwist he'ped pen them cattle!'

Lant slipped through the crowd He could see Kezzy craning her head for him, and his mother's turtle-lidded eyes blinking He hurried away and out of the court-house He picked up a ride in the first car he recognised as headed for the river When he reached Eureka he walked through the piney woods in the direction of Tom Mersey's place Before he reached it, he turned off and paced the river trail for more than an hour, back and forth, his chin on his chest At high noon he made directly for the Mersey house Several cars stood in the yard under the live-oaks The front door was open and he walked in He heard Ardis' thin laugh in the dining room and made for it blindly In the doorway he stopped short. The room was full of people. A negress was putting dinner on the table

He saw Bill Mersey standing with his arm across John Streeter's shoulders The other Streeters were gesticulating

in a corner He recognised the high sheriff deep in talk with Ardis' father Three or four deputies were in the group He drew back his foot as though the men in the room were moccasins in a swamp Ardis stared at him *Bill Mersey caught sight of him*

He called, 'Come in, Lant No need to look so scared of the sheriff even if you were raised on swamp cabbage and 'coon's milk"

The room shook with laughter Ardis moved towards him A cold horror flowed over him Officers of the law—spies—aliens He swung his body in the doorway and bolted through the house He heard Ardis' light steps following He moved quickly past the live-oaks in the yard and struck through the piney woods towards the river He did not want her She was something he had bolted whole in his hunger and had spewed up

XXIX

In the fall Lant bought Abner's second hand Ford car Piety had begged for a new roof instead

He said, "I kin make twicet as much money if I got a way to deliver to them city scapers Then you kin have your roof"

Cleve brought him the car from Abner on a bright November morning Lant ran to the gate to take possession He called over his shoulder, 'Come on, Ma, git you a ride," and she followed him, untying her gingham apron The car was dingy and disreputable, but the motor was still good Lant sat in the driver s seat with pride in the regular explosions Piety climbed stiffly in the back and examined the worn upholstery with interest. Lant had driven occasionally for Abner and the mechanism was familiar Cleve grinned at his excitement and slouched down beside him

"We'll go see Uncle Zeke," Lant said He added, "A pity Uncle Thad s dead, we could go see him, too"

Piety called loudly from the rear, "Kin go see the ol' place, anyways"

The small leaves of scrub oak and of sparkleberry glinted in the strong sunlight The car passed Martha's old clearing, where she lay buried with Lantry and Thad and the Jacklin and Lantry infants The blackjacks there were stained orange and red and cedar-brown by the first frosts The sky bent down to them as indigo-blue as the quilt-backs Piety and Kezzy had made together. Piety thought a quilt would be pretty in the blackjack colour-

ings, with the oak leaf itself for pattern But it was lonely, piecing and quilting by herself They stopped to wave to Zeke, then drove as far as Thad s old clearing and turned around The cabin was in ruins, and only smilax and trumpet vines held the sides together. The roof slanted over them More of her kin lay dead in the scrub than moved there alive Piety was sorry she had come

She thought, 'Seem like makin' a show in front o' the dead"

Lant drove home in a high ecstasy, but she held tight to the frayed seat, her slight figure bouncing on every curve, remembering Thaddeus and Willy and Martha and her father

Cleve said, 'Kezzy said you should carry me home and stay to dinner She says she cain't wait to see ol' Lant set tin' up behind the wheel" He laughed derisively

Lant said, "I kin be off today How bout it, Ma?"

'Yes," she said decisively, "I want to go I want to see Kezzy and the baby He s six months old and I ain't seed him yit You wait now, I want to take her somethin'"

She started up the fenced in lane to the house

'You ain't fitten to go through Eureka," she called to Lant.

He grumbled but gave in Cleve walked about the yard as they changed their clothes Piety washed hurriedly in the hand basin and took water to her bedroom to bathe her feet She put on a grey and white print dress Her face, thin and seamed, shone like clean polished horn She put on a high brown straw hat with faded cloth roses on it She moved quickly and had ready her bundles for Kezzy by the time Lant appeared in a clean blue shirt and grey cotton trousers His red hair was brushed smooth

"Now you look fitten," she said

"Ne' mind the way I look What all you takin' to Kezzy?"

He pried into the paper sacks of sweet potatoes, turnip greens and a pan of cold fried squirrel

That's a sorry mess

'Hit's all I got

He groped through the kitchen safe and passed out a paper-covered glass of grape jelly, a Mason jar of peaches and another of wild honey

"Them young uns o' hers don't git no sweetenin'," he said.

'Kezzy gives 'em sweetenin'," she said indignantly

'When Cleve gits it there to give 'em"

Cleve was sulky when they joined him He had been looking over Lant's belongings, handling the new focussing flashlight and the blow torch

I wisht I could have me sich as this," he said

Lant said, "All you got to do is work for 'em"

'They ain't no work"

'I'll give you work Right now You kin cut ash wood for me ary day you see fit'

Cleve did not answer

"What you been usin' the blow-torch for?' he asked

They walked to the car

'He's been usin' it lately to try and burn the house down,' Piety said "That's jest what he's been a-doin' with it"

'How come?'

'Why, it's the antses," Lant said impatiently "Them sons o' bitches has got a perfeck trail to the kitchen table I found out where they was nestin' under the house and I put the blow-torch to 'em, is all"

"And set fire to the under pinnin's," Piety declared "Then it was to run with buckets o' water and th'ow sand And him chasin' the antses with the blow-torch right on When he take a notion that a way, a thing's as good as done time he think of it."

He grinned

"You ain't woke up since to find them scoundrels kiverin' up the cold biscuits, have you? Well, then Dogged if it ain't fight to git food, and then fight to keep it"

They drove the dim scrub road, turned to cross the bridge over the river, through Eureka and out the piney-woods road to Kezzy's small rented farm She put down the new baby and came to meet them The women embraced in silence The men walked back of the house to look at the well Kezzy was having dug

Piety said, 'Hit's mighty good to be neighbourin' with you agin, Kezzy How yuh?'

Kezzy laughed Well, we ain't starved to death yit."

'How you come out with your hogs?"

"Aunt Py tee, they ain t bringin' but four cents a pound We got a leetle corn left, and I declare hit's better to fatten 'em and kill 'em for lard and not have to buy no compound."

'You mighty right You got to have grease A man kin make out without meat but he shore cain't without grease"

'I declare, Aunt Py tee, times is hard for folks around here. They's talk o' more trouble 'bout the cattle, and them as kep' stock will likely have to sell 'em, and them bringin' not much more'n the hogs The pore people'll starve when you take the stock away from 'em They cain't hardly make out as 'tis"

They sat on the rickety porch and Piety held the baby. The two-year boy played around their chairs Kezzy leaned over and looked closely at the older woman

"How you feelin', Aunt Py tee? Your eyes looks bad agin"

"They is I ain't got but a piece o' sight."

"You'd orter git you some glasses"

"I been to town with Lant one time. I been to the dime store and all over and I couldn't find none to fit."

"Hit's them cataracks, like."

"Must be I've got to where I'm moon-eyed, Kezzy I can't hardly see, day times, but when the moon's bright I kin see mighty plain"

"Aunt Py tee, you know I kin hear you, times, acrost the river, callin' your hogs?"

"Kin?"/

"I heerd you 'tother evenin' at dusk-dark, standin' at my water shelf. I said, 'Wisht I could speak to her, pore ol' soul'"

They rocked back and forth Wasps buzzed in the clay daubed rafters overhead Kezzy rose from her chair and slapped at them

'Them hateful dirt-daubers!' She dug at one with a stick "I'll kill him if I kin rout him" She knocked the wasp to the floor, where the child crushed it. He said, "You'll quit totin' mud now!'

Piety said, "I carried you some sweetenin' and some squirrel meat"

"We been eatin' quail," Kezzy smiled "I don't know what I'd of done for meat thouten my leetle ol' trap We've got a bait of 'em—we're ready for squirrel" She frowned "Aunt Py-tee, I'm mighty sorry you're porely"

"I ain't too young, Kezzy"

"You ain't old You got no white hair to speak of I'm like to turn white ahead of you"

"Your hair's so dark Dark haired people tarnish quicker"

Cleve and Lant came to the porch, talking of the well Old man Lonny Sours was a well finder He had found the spot for digging He had walked back and forth with a green forked persimmon switch, holding it ahead of him It had turned down over the hidden water The bark had twisted in his hands. He had approached the place from all angles to get the exact spot. He had said, "Dig here—

here's your water" They expected to bring in the well in another day or two

'Cain't ever' man find water," Kezzy said "Ol man Sours has got the gift He'll tell you to the foot how deep to go He'll tie a string 'round a two shillin' piece and lower it easy in a glass o' water and he'll tell you how many feet down your well water'll lay"

"Where you been gittin' water?"

'Down to Ab's Been a totin' it I catches rain water under the eaves, but the magnolia leaves colours it so's it's hardly fitten"

"How fur's it to Ab's from here?'

"They calls it a mile, but I figgers they measured the road with a 'coonskin, and th'owed in the tail ever' lap"

Kezzy was expecting them for dinner and the food was plentiful If rations would be scanty the rest of the week, she made no sign She urged on them helpings of rice and home-cured bacon and cow peas, white bread from the store, and her own cake

"I do make good lard cake," she admitted

Lant said, "I wisht you'd made hot bread 'stid o' this wasp's nest light-bread Put me some more grease on them swamp-seeds"

"Lant, you're a sight"

'He's a sight," Piety agreed with enthusiasm "He's a pure sight Look at him with them peas—he's eatin' nothin' but the soup on 'em"

"He knows what he likes," Kezzy said easily "Leave him be."

"I wisht I had you cookin' for me, Kezzy," he said "Hit's a pain to git what I want cooked"

"Now at my house," Cleve drawled, "the trouble is to git it there to cook."

They laughed comfortably.

Cleve said, "Anyways, I sold me a 'gator hide last week Shot hit on the bank"

After dinner Lant took Kezzy aside.

'You jest ain't makin' out, Kezzy What all's Cleve been a-doin'?"

She was evasive

'Oh—chippin' boxes now and agin"

'That's nigger work," he said 'Turpentinin' don't make a white man no livin'

'He had a offer to go guardin' to the convict camp"

"Why'n't he take it?'

"Jest someway didn t suit him Now, Lant, don't you pay us no mind We'll make out"

'*Zeke sent you five dollars, didn t he?*'

'Pore ol Zeke—I ll swear I hated takin' it the worst way"

"If 'twa'n't for Zeke," he said angrily, "somebody'd smell a patch in the fire"

'You ol' snoopy thing, you," she laughed "You knows too much"

"I ain't meanin' to interfere," he said in alarm 'I offered Cleve work, cuttin' ash wood to burn at the outfit I jest want to know, do he r'aly want it I got to have me a piece o' he'p and the work s his if he'll take it."

"He'll take it," she said quietly 'He'll be there Monday-week"

Piety called from the porch

"We better *git goin'*"

He started towards the door

Kezzy laid a hand on his arm

"Lant, did Cleve tell you about Ardis?"

He stopped

"Cleve *ain't said nothin'* about her"

"She got married. A feller from the town they lived in"

A hot wave swept across him, picturing the small body in a stranger's arms. The wave receded.

He said, "Leave her git married."

Ardis was a stranger, too. Kezzy watched him closely. He drew a deep breath He wanted a rattlesnake against him no more than he wanted the yellow-headed girl. He burst out laughing

"By God," he said, "I hope she's got her a Prohi."

XXX

Dead limbs were falling in the swamp It was a certain sign of rain They fell from the trees before and after, as though some dropped in terror of the moist burden, and others resisted a little longer Limpkins were crying, and it would not be long before the grey curtain over the scrub and river dissolved into a sweep of rain A drop spattered now and then like lead on a palmetto leaf Lant and Cleve poled the rowboat noiselessly up the creek

Lant said, "We kin git us them ash saplin's right yonder"

Cleve did not answer and he headed the boat between cypress knees Cleve in the bow hauled it over a twisting mass of black rattan and looped the chain around a sweet gum They clambered over fallen palmettos through the black muck of the cypress swamp In wet weather the swamp was a bog, but the winter had been dry Occasionally a spot was deceptive and they sank over their shoe-tops in mire

Lant had used the same canopy over his still during the years he had been 'shining, changing the palmetto fronds each season The sapling supports had buried themselves in the creek muck until the canopy came now too low for comfort It would be easier to cut and sink new poles than to root out the old ones, only, perhaps, to find them rotting

Cleve lagged behind while Lant picked ash saplings of the proper length He felled each of the four with half a

dozen axe-strokes Cleve helped to trim them down They walked lightly back through the swamp with the long poles over their shoulders Cleve trailed them in the water against the boat side while Lant paddled down stream towards his whiskey outfit He took the creek curves neatly, so that the poles should not become entangled in the overwhelming foliage He made a comment now and then on the impending rain Cleve made no answer

Mash was working in the barrels on the platform It was not yet ready to run, and they stirred it with heavy paddles Lant scooped up a handful of the fermenting liquid from each barrel in turn and tasted it critically

"'Tain't fur from ready," he said

He covered the barrels again and climbed an overhanging sweet gum to drive the sharpened point of the first sapling deep into the mud He sat in a fork of the tree and wrapped his long legs around the trunk and drove the sapling with the axe head The entire outfit stood exposed, barrels, coils, cooker and drums, to any one who should come up the creek But no one came except Cleve and Zeke and Abner The Poseys, whose outfit was a mile and a half to the south, knew only the approximate location There was only one entrance into the creek It was masked and seemingly impenetrable

As they worked, driving in the fourth sapling, they heard a distant whistle like a bird-call It was almost certainly a hunter indicating his position to a companion on a deer-stand, but they took no chances. They dropped their axes and small equipment hurriedly in the boat, jumped in and were away in silence in an instant

"Mought be the wrong cat bird whistlin'," Lant said

They poled out to the river and cut in again at Otter Landing Lant hid the paddles and an empty demi-john in the myrtle bushes They went a hundred yards farther south and into Lant's car to drive to his house.

The rain had begun when they reached the clearing Large drops were falling like hail

Lant said, "You comin' in, ain't you?"

Cleve spoke for the first time

'I'm goin' to Zeke's"

"You best take the car then You'll git plumb drownded time you git there"

"I don't want your damn car I'd rather walk"

'Suit yourself Hit's your business if you want to cut the fool"

Cleve slammed the car door and stalked down the road in the rain His round pasty face was sullen Lant left the car at the gate and hurried up the lane to the house Piety shaded her half blind eyes to see him

She said, 'I thought shore I heerd you speakin' to somebody"

"You done so," he agreed in exasperation 'Hit were Cleve I be dogged if I know what ails him He won't work and he won't work He's been sulling from a ways back, and now he's actin' jest purely ugly Ary other man, I'd crawl his frame '

"Wa'n't your wood up today neither?"

Hit weren't up, and the last strand he cut were so sorry hit didn't outlast my second firin' I had to git out and scratch for wood in the middle o' the run"

He sat down by the hearth and took off his wet shoes and stretched his feet to the fire.

"I b'lieve he's fixin' jest to walk out on me and go work for Poseys I don't no more look for him to come back tomorrer than I look for the moon to drap in the river"

"If he'd only tell you," she said, rocking close to him, "you'd know how to figger"

"That's it If he'd jest say If he'll keep the work, I'll put up with it, and him so sorry He talked all mornin'

'bout Poseys havin' a nigger to cut the wood Then all evenin' he had nary word to say'

Leave him go to Poseys," she said You don't keer, long as Kezzy and them young uns has somethin' on the table Cleve's jealous, he s jest perfeckly jealous'

Since I painted the car, he agreed

'Since you painted the car and put a top on it He can't stand to see you goin' decent

I ve done offered him a half interest in the outfit, if he d divide the time I need he p bad I could sell twicet as much agin, with a bigger outfit and good he p

'He won't do it,' she said vehemently 'He jest won t do the work You be glad if he do go to Poseys'

In the morning Lant went early to his outfit His mash was ready to run He had a small supply of ash wood Cleve did not appear Lant started a fire in his furnace and when his buck made its turn-over in the cooker, he capped it, slowed down his fire and went looking for Zeke Zeke was not at home Lant went home and called his mother from her work in the garden

"Ma, you jest got to come watch my fire and my pot whilst I cut me some wood"

'I got a leetle stove wood here you kin have, and welcome," she told him

They took the stove wood in their arms and she followed him back of the house to the swamp She sat on her thin old haunches and tended the fire under the still She heard him chopping in the lower hammock He returned with armfuls of ash Towards noon Zeke joined them

'My old woman said you was lookin' for me," he said hopefully

Lant said, "I don't miss it Zeke, how good you these days, swingin' a axe?"

"Them ash saplin's, I kin cut them all day"

"Well, you got you a job right now, then"

"Cleve quit you?"

"Hit look that-a way" He added, "Now I tell you, Zeke, if Cleve was to come back soon, I d figger the work was his, right on"

Zeke agreed "I wouldn't take the work from him noways But I jest as leave tell you, I m glad to git a chancet at it We ain't been eatin' too reg lar to my house lately'

Zeke's strength was adequate for the wood-cutting He turned out a comfortable strand a day For three weeks there was no word from Cleve Then Lant passed him on the river He was with the Poseys Lant saw their boat turn up the creek that led, he knew, to the Posey still

The hunters left the scrub and the swamp The red bud bloomed above the river, the limpkins cried, the eagles nested and it was spring Cleve worked at the Poseys' still until May Then Jim Posey fired him Lant saw Kezzy at the store in Eureka

"I hear, Jim fired Cleve," he said to her

She nodded

He got work agin?'

She looked at him

She said quietly, 'He ain't tried I ain't hurryin' him this

a le

is

I figger it Then when things gits bad agin, time enough for me to romp on him to git to work God knows I cain't keep him at it all the time"

Drought set in early in June instead of the usual summer rains. Lant looked at his mother's parched garden

He said, "If Kezzy's cow-peas and greens looks like ours——"

Lant went to his outfit on the first of July He started, seeing a slouched figure on the platform Cleve was waiting for him

Cleve said sulkily, "I jest as good to cut your wood agin."

Lant said, "I've give that job to Zeke. You know that." He asked quickly, "Did Kezzy send you?"

Cleve said, "Yes."

"You lyin'. Kezzy said you should go anywhere but me. Didn't she?"

Cleve narrowed his pale eyes and did not answer.

"Kezzy told you not to interfere with Zeke," Lant said. "I ain't goin' to interfere with him. He's got to eat, same as you. He's been faithful. I ain't goin' to turn the ol' feller off and then you work a week maybe and go off the way you done before."

Cleve said, "Zeke don't need work. He's got money hid out."

"He do not. No use for you to talk, Cleve, I've give Zeke the work and you cain't ask me out of it."

Cleve said hotly, "All right. You be biggety now. You jest go right on bein' biggety."

He plunged angrily through the swamp to his boat.

At dinner Lant said to Piety, "Cleve come askin' for the wood-cuttin' back agin."

"You give it to him?"

"I ain't turnin' Zeke off for nobody."

"You got Kezzy to think of."

"I'm thinkin' o' Kezzy. She do better with Zeke workin' than Cleve. Zeke sends her money when things gits thick for her."

"You're makin' a leetle more'n we need. Seems to me you could save the quarrelin' and look out for Kezzy yourself."

He frowned.

"I cain't git her to take nothin'. I don't understand Kezzy no-ways. Now and agin she'll take it from Zeke, but I be dogged if she'll take it from me."

In mid July Jim Posey stopped Lant as their rowboats, loaded with meal and sugar, passed on the river

Jim asked, "Lant, you been missin' ary thing from your —place o' business?"

'Nary thing"

Jim flushed

'I reckon they's no use you and me actin' too private. I jest as leave tell you, they's been ten gallons stole from back o' my outfit." He spat in the river 'Dog take it, I got no use for a thief I make my money honest"

Lant said, "You got ary idee who 'tis?'

'I kin come all around namin' you the man"

Jim released his hold on Lant's rowboat and they began to drift apart.

Jim said, "If it's who I figger 'tis, I reckon you're not like to be bothered The sorriest kind of a feller don't gin'rally steal from his own kin"

When his day's work was done, Lant sat in the cool of the July twilight, picking abstractedly at his banjo Piety, watching his face, questioned him

"Cleve's fixin' to git hisself into trouble," he admitted, and refused to tell her more

Dog days came in and lay like hot lead on scrub and river The August sun blazed on the pine trees and scorched the corn in the field Chickens went with wings lifted to cool themselves and hounds panted in the shadows underneath the houses Folk went to bed exhausted and awakened at daybreak smothered in an invisible blanket. The mocking-birds stopped singing and the snakes began to shed Every one stepped warily, for the rattlesnakes had become blind and vicious. Sand gnats swarmed in clouds and passed the sore-eyes from one baby to another Women who had saved May water from the rains in May doled it out to cure the affliction Children whimpered and

fretted in the heat The old folks grew irritable Even soft-cooked grits did not feel smooth and good against the palate Chills and fever went the rounds Tempers were short

On a white blinding day Jim and Martin Posey met Cleve on the Eureka bridge They were riding in their car and Cleve was on foot They stopped him

Jim said, 'I been wantin' to ask you about some whiskey o' mine showed up at Lynne"

Cleve said, 'I don't know nothin' about your whiskey"

Jim said, "You say that oncet agin'

Cleve jumped on the running board and leaned into the car His right arm hung behind him, as though he held a gun Jim picked up a hunting knife on the floor of the car and sliced at Cleve across the cheek and ear Cleve dropped back with his hand against the bleeding streak. The Poseys drove on quickly.

XXXI

Cane-grinding at Abner Lantry's place began in the afternoon of the last day of October Abner was the first to grind along the river, and every one would be there for the fresh cane juice and the fun Cars and wagons began to pass Kezzy's house after dinner Youngsters went by on foot, bare legged and jostling Kezzy watched the road for Lant's car He swerved into the yard at three o'clock Piety bounced beside him on the front seat

Lant said, 'You ready to go git your belly full o' cane juice?'

She picked up the small boy and the baby and dropped them into the back of the open car

'I can't hardly wait to git my nose in the bucket," she said

Lant shut off the motor

"Ain't Cleve goin'?' he asked

'He ain't even here"

"Ain't he quit sullin' yit about Jim cuttin' him?"

She shook her head

'Now, Lant," she said, 'Cleve went off soon this mornin' and said he was gittin' a ride to Jacksonville. I don't know, did he mean it."

Piety asked, "Is his cuts healed good?"

'You can't hardly see the scar Hit didn't amount to nothin'" She threw back her smooth dark head and laughed

"This is one evenin' I ain't goin' to set home and worry," she said lightly 'First day o' cane grindin' don t come but oncet a year."

She loaded herself in with the children

She said to them delightedly, "Ain t we the biggety things now, ridin' to cane grindin' in a automobile"

She hailed the gathering with zest as they turned under the live-oaks into Abner s yard She held the baby loosely in one arm like a bundle and waved her free hand to her friends

'I swear, Ab," she called to the host, "you ain't growed enough sugar-cane to make all the juice I aim to drink'

'You go chase a hog!' he cried

'I ve done enough o' that!'

She handed Piety the baby She ran to the mill, where boys pushed long stalks of sugar-cane into the gears as a slow horse walked around and around Kezzy pushed the boys away and fed in a handful of stalks

'The bucket o' juice I'm fixin' to drink," she told them, 'I ain t got the heart to let nobody else do the mill feedin

Abner followed her "I hope you satisfied, Miss Kezzy You been rarin' to feed the mill the first day o' grindin'' He looked at her closely "Your old man Cleve got better comp'ny than ours this evenin'?'

She picked up a fresh handful of stalks and watched them attentively

'Now, Ab," she said, 'they's jest no sich thing as better comp'ny than yours."

He laughed and went across the yard to Lant and Piety and the children

The juice gushed from the spout into a wooden bucket It was green and clouded Children dipped tin cups into its thin sweetness and ran away into corners to drink The juice was chilled by the November air, and it seemed as if no one could get enough Kezzy called Lant to take her place, and tipped back her black head to drink until she gasped for air.

Abner would not begin to boil syrup until the next day Every one was thirsty for cane juice, and all the evening the horse would walk around the mill, with a child or two on his back Some would take turns at feeding in the stalks while others satisfied a year-old longing A mule and wagon were bringing in load after load of new-cut stalks In the morning the great fire would be built under the syrup kettle and the juice would be boiled down in forty gallon lots The grinding and boiling would go on for two or three weeks Today and tonight folk drank and laughed and children ran and romped

Eph Wilson's wife had died and they talked of her and of Eph He was mean and stingy and they said of him, "He'd favour a nigger a heap quicker'n one of his own young uns" Eph's wife had needed her teeth pulled and the man had refused her, saying he could not afford the work They said, 'She had beef cattle enough when she died, to fix her teeth He sold her cattle right along with his For the most part, the talk had no malice There was much joking and pranking When a commotion arose among the children, a mother of ten settled it by a general slapping of small ears

'You have to frail all the young uns to git the right un," she explained "Start with a big un and end with the least un"

Piety and Lant and Kezzy ate cold supper with Abner and his wife As the autumn dusk sifted crisp and blue through the piney woods, newcomers came for the night's cane grinding and the night's frolic. Abner had a small talking machine with a horn, and the younger men kept one record going for an hour, "The Fox Chase" One called to another, "Come listen to this here ol' nigger playin' and singin' the Fox Chase!" They imitated the record. "Listen to them ol' dogs a-bayin'—*yip-yip-woo-o!*'

Lant said, "I d like to have me a talkin' machine, jest to set and listen to the Fox Chase

Martin Posey said, The nigger do it all hisself, too"

Lant said, 'He don t do it all Them s rale dogs"

Martin insisted, 'No they ain't It s him

Lant said, "Well, if he kin sound that clost to a dog, the Lord had orter give him a tail and call him Spot' and let him run rabbits and drink branch water '

Old man Lonny Sours began to play the fiddle in the desultory fashion of a dog scratching himself He scraped the strings casually, then struck off tuneless phrases, looking around the room with a solemn detachment The music took form in a tune He played 'The Rosewood Casket" and two children crossed hands and danced the schottische down the length of the bare pine floor Abner s wife waddled in from the kitchen with an extra kerosene light to place on the mantel near the fiddler Abner came into the room with Eph Wilson, holding out a white china pitcher of cane juice He put his arm around his wife s thick waist as she passed

'When you git you another wife, Eph," he said, 'you want you a big woman like this un Then you won't have to buy you no cover for winter

She said behind her hand, 'Now I jest wonder what my Uncle Ben would say if I was to go on home with you, Eph?"

"I might have somethin' I didn t know what to do with," Eph said "I might have to call somebody to git me out from under Abner"

The fiddler played "Hog, Hominy and Grits," and Martin Posey eased into a chair beside him and joined in on a harmonica

Lant said to Kezzy, "I d a heap rather he'd play the jumbo jew's-harp I don't like the way he chokes his mouth-organ"

A girl called from the doorway to the crowd around the cane mill A bonfire burned between the mill and the house for light and warmth. Boys foraged about the yard and down the road and threw on dry palmetto fronds and dog fennel to make it blaze Half a dozen couples detached themselves from the light, like shadows shifting and ran into the house to join the set that was forming for the square-dance Two or three older pairs entered the circle and stood with linked hands to wait for the calling A boy, scurrying about for a partner, coaxed Ab s wife into the circle. She was an old hand and knew the figures, and moved her feet under her bulk as lightly as chipmunks. Martin Posey took his mouth from the harmonica

'One more couple, and le s go Lant Jacklin, you take out Kezzy"

The circle began to shuffle The boys hailed Lant.

'Here, Blue John! Here's your home!'

His head bobbed on his long neck. He grumbled good humouredly

'Dogged if I wouldn t rather be home in the scrub than messin up in sich a ruckus with you sorry jessies'

They laughed One said, "Lant, you a hell of a streaklin'"

Kezzy said affectionately, "Honey, you do favour a Blue john somethin' turrible You cain t quarrel with em about it no-ways"

He said, "You catch you another Blue john for the next, then One set and I m done with you"

He had not danced since early spring He unlimbered his long legs and swung Kezzy with gusto Her white skin was flushed and her soft black eyes were shining

'I was about to figger I was gittin' old," she panted when they were dancing close

In the doorway he caught a sudden glimpse of a familiar round face. It was looking directly at him. It was white

with hate It could not be Cleve, he thought, staring at him so When the change of partners in a figure brought him opposite the doorway again, the face was gone He thought, I m gittin' bad as a damn nigger to see things ' When the set was ended he left Kezzy abruptly and ran into the yard There was no one there Beyond, men and women and boys and girls ran and shouted about the cane mill The bonfire blazed between house and mill Lant walked in and out among the groups Cleve was not in sight He thought, That booger gittin' awful light footed' He walked back across the yard and studied the footprints about the doorway in the light that came from the room Kezzy stood by the hearth fire He walked across the room to her

"Kezzy, was Cleve wearin them big ol boots he had half soled in the spring?

'I believe he did have 'em on this mornin', Lant She looked at him curiously Why?

I jest wondered

He stood beside her, warming himself at the fire No one was dancing

The fiddler and young Posey played "Double Eagle" and 'Ninety-seven and 'Waiting for a Train" The music whined and squeaked unheeded Even the young bloods preferred to be outside tonight, drinking cane juice and racing around the bonfire The older folks had become chilled in the cool air, and most of them were gathered in the room for gossip near the fat wood fire

Here were lights and music and talk and gayety A cane grinding was the best of life, and a frolic warmed the blood like wine. Tonight there was a common safety, a common closeness and a common delight The room grew warm and the old fiddler and young Posey were red and wet of face. Kezzy went to them and fanned them with

a palm leaf while they played She stood placid and maternal, smiling a little to herself

The young baby slept in the adjoining bedroom with others of his age Piety held the older boy on her thin lap, where he dozed uncomfortably, burrowing his head against her flat chest. It was good to be sitting with old women who knew the things she knew Age marked these women early The young girls were inclined to be plump and buxom, with heavy legs and large buttocks They were dressed with much flimsy style Their bland faces were painted They were ripe and enticing Life pared them down in a hurry Here and there a middle aged woman, prosperous as the section went, was fat and hearty Almost without exception the older women were stripped gaunt and meagre, as though they had walked on foot a long sandy way

But if the road had been hard it was also pleasant If a living was uncertain, and the sustaining of breath precarious why, existence took on an added value and a greater sweetness The tissues of life were food and danger These were the warp and woof, and all else was an incidental pattern, picked out with vari-coloured wools Love and lust, hate and friendship grief and frolicking, even birthing and dying were thin grey and scarlet threads across the sun browned thick and sturdy stuff that was life itself The old women sat together with bare, translucent faces, knowing that the pulse of blood through the veins was a rich, choice thing, and the drawing of a breath was good

As the evening wore on, men joined them by the hearth, and then the young folks, surfeited and sleepy They talked of hogs and cattle, of crops and the weather and the law They spoke of a family of Yankee newcomers to the piney woods, who had not come to the cane-grinding

Kezzy said, "Them pore leetle ol' Yankees don't know what to make of us Crackers. I tell 'em I'm a fool and cain't he'p it and no use to hide it"

Old man Lonny Sours offered, "I hears tell they're Catholics"

"That's what they say"

Abner tilted back in a cow hide chair and said, "Hit don't make no difference what a man perfesses I been in a heap o' churches There's the Nazarene Church and the Pentecost and the Holy Rollers and the Baptists and I don't know what all I cain't see much difference to nary one of 'em There's a good to all of 'em and there's a bad"

Lonny Sours persisted, "All I got agin the Catholics now, is they got no freedom Ary one seed them nuns with them bonnets, like, over their heads and faces? They has to wear them things all the time"

He added, nodding his head, "Even to bed"

Abner said, "Well, I never watched one of 'em go to bed"

His wife remarked, "Sho, ever'body goes in a Catholic church has to have his head kivered"

Lonny pondered "Don't you reckon," he asked, "hit's an opinion they hold?"

Abner said, clearing his throat, "We been gittin' a magazine. Hit tells about a heap o' quare idees. Hit tells about the Muslems"

"I've heerd tell o' them, seems to me," Lonny said, "but I cain't rightly place 'em Who was them Muslems? A form o' Catholics?"

"I cain't say as to that But they pays right smart attention to the sun and figgers ever'thing comes fum the East, like. They think it's fitten and proper a man should keep hisself a hull mess o' wives."

"Seems to me that's all right," Martin Posey ventured mildly. The girls giggled.

They talked a while of all strange things and far-off people The women gathered up the sleeping children and said, "Good night, all Some kind of enjoyed the cane juice" The boys ran from the house and into the road in a last gust of energy

Abner Lantry called, "Kezzy, you keep away from them Muslems"

She laughed

'Tain t right to laugh," she said, sobering "I declare, it makes me faint hearted to think there's sich people with sich ways"

She carried the baby, sleeping, high on one shoulder. Piety led the small boy They climbed into Lant s car. Lant's mouth was dry and he left them and cut across the yard towards the cane mill to drink from the bucket of juice His tread was light in the sand He saw two men in the darkness under a shed roof He recognised Jim Posey Then he heard the voice of the storekeeper and postmaster

He heard him say to Jim, "I m not supposed to mention what goes through the mails But you men have been good customers so long I feel obliged to warn you A letter went to the Prohibition agents at Jacksonville yesterday. I'm pretty sure it was in Cleve Jacklin's writing"

Lant went to his car and drove Kezzy home through the spiced darkness of the piney woods A light was burning in her house when he stopped at the gate. He said "Good night" and with Piety drove quickly away

A week later he stood in the sandy yard under the live-oak oiling a steel trap He heard the gate click at the rear of the garden and looked up Kezzy was coming through the garden She had not hailed jovially from a distance, as was her custom. She walked to him without speaking.

Her face was white and her eyes were red and swollen. Her mouth trembled She spoke in a low voice

'I don't know if I'm doin' right or not I cried all night, studyin' Hit ain't natural for a woman to go agin her husband, whatever he do But 'tain't natural for Cleve to do what he's a-doin'"

'Come in the house and set down, Kezzy"

Piety joined them at the breezeway, holding to the wall as she walked

"Who's there?'

'It s me, Aunt Py tee. I jest now rowed acrost the river"

The younger woman laid her cheek a moment against the other's

"I m carryin' bad news, Aunt Py tee. Hit concern you as much as Lant"

'Well, set down, anyway"

'Lant, Cleve's turned you up to the Prohis"

Piety said sharply, "He ain't done no sich thing"

'I know what I'm sayin' Ain t I tried to ask him out of it, until it was me keep still or him to knock me down for it? He's turned you up, Lant, right along with Poseys and Luke Saunders You ain't heerd about the letter he wrote to Jacksonville? I didn't know nothin' about that, but a letter come back to him I went to the box for the mail and I seed where 'twere from, and it marked gov'mint business, or somethin' like that He's been jest a-boilin' since Jim cut him, and right off I figgered what 'twas Bless God, I no more thought you was in it—but I opened it, and that was it The Prohis had done got a letter from him, sayin' they was three stills he could tell 'em about along the river They was sendin' a man and wanted he should name a place and time to meet him I jest nachelly tore the letter up I reckon he kep' askin' at the post-office hadn't no letter come for him, and he found out. When

he come at me about it, I faced him down about the hull mess He said, Yes, he was turnin' you all up I says, You got some complaint against Jim He were hasty cuttin' you You got nothin' agin Luke Saunders God know you got nothin' agin Lant"

'What did he say then?'

'He think he do He said you wouldn't give him work when he asked for it"

"'Tain t so, not that a way He quit me in the winter Jest walked off to Poseys and said nothin I give Zeke the work and I couldn't see my way to take it from him agin, and Cleve mebbe do me the same way he done before I d done offered Cleve shares in the outfit and he wouldn't do the work"

"Don't tell me Nobody on earth cain t git him to work He won't work and he don t want the other fellow to git no beneefit from workin' Time you painted your ol' car, and put a kiver to it, he acted like he had the itch ever time he'd see you in it"

Piety said, 'He wouldn't turn Lant up for sich as that?"

"Aunt Py tee, there's twenty five dollars in it Ary still a man turns up, he's heerd tell the Prohis pays that much He says if there's twenty five dollars in it, he ll turn up all he kin find I says to him, You cain't take a man's livin' away from him that a way, not even Jim Hit's their livin'. you got no right to tech it Think of Lant and Aunt Py-tee, I says What would Aunt Py-tee do if Lant was to have his livin' takened away? Cleve, I says, you cain't do it. Them's your kin folks"

'What did he say?"

She drew a hand across her red, tired eyes.

"He said, 'Damn the kin folks'"

She rose to go

"Like I say, mebbe I'm doin' wrong, but hit's my best opinion to tell you I ve done tole Luke and tole him to tell

Poseys A man's got nary right to interfere with another man's livin', I don't keer what he's done"

She leaned down to stroke Piety's cat, then hurried through the garden and across the clearing The staunch figure disappeared in the hammock at the top of the ledge Lant and Piety had not stirred from their places in the breezeway

Piety asked, "You goin' to move the outfit, eh?"

"I dunno"

He began to walk up and down with his hands behind him and his chin sunk on his chest Piety could make out his features dimly A memory, as blurred as her sight, came to her of Lantry, her father, pacing in the same tense fashion At last he stopped

'I ain't a goin' to move it Hit's a heap o' work, and mebbe them scoundrels ketch me in the middle of it *Mebbe I'd git it moved, and them come up on the new* place Ain't no better place on the river no-ways, exscusin' the Dread I couldn't git the stuff down the river to the Dread now, and them not see me"

"Well, I'd move it," she said 'Cleve knows right where it's at"

"He cain't describe it so's no stranger in the world could find it"

"He mought show 'em the way hisself."

He snorted

"That sorry bastard won't show his tracks nowheres along this river"

"Now you call him most ary name you're o' mind to," she said, 'but Marthy were his mother and she were my sister, and she were a good woman Don't you go callin' Cleve no bastard Nor no son of a bitch, neither You're awfu' free with your names"

"The pimp, then."

"That's better," she agreed cordially "A whole heap better. The pimp."

XXXII

To the south a column of grey smoke ascended It was not far off, no farther than a mile or two

Lant said to Piety, 'I know good and well Poseys ain't firin' that heavy, knowin' the Prohis 'll be nosin' around"

The smoke darkened and grew thicker A black cloud billowed towards the sky The wind was from the west It took the smoke in its sweep and spread it thinly over the scrub

'I got to go see," Lant said

'You look out, now You'll run into them fellers, if that s what 'tis"

'I ain't goin' to run into no Prohis I m goin' up the river They kin pass me much as they re o' mind to I mought know them but how kin they know me?"

'Well, you be keerful, anyways '

Since her sight had failed her, the woman's hearing had become acute She heard a dry branch crack on the hammock ledge as he passed through it, then the rattle of the chain as he loosened the rowboat in the creek below

He had been gone from the house fifteen or twenty minutes when she heard a car grinding through the ball bearing sand at the turn of the scrub road below the lane She craned her neck and shaded her eyes, to see. She could make out nothing more than a dark streak, rounding the bend between scrub and hammock and moving to the north Half an hour later she heard the sound of axes on wood and metal The noise diminished and the west wind brought to her nose the smell of things burning

that had not burned before. She knew the odours of burn-

dim sight discerned the smoke, a broad column that reared from below the hammock ledge. It was rank and dark, as though the swamp itself were burning The Prohis were at Lant's still.

She did not dare wait longer She was afraid the house would be next invaded. Lant had twelve gallons unsold from his last run There were two five gallon oak kegs and two gallon glass jugs. The kegs were almost more than she could lift, but she made two trips with them to the hammock, stumbling blindly across the intervening clearing She concealed them under palmetto clumps. She ran back and forth through the house with a gallon jug in either hand, then hid them, one deep in her flour-barrel, the other under the pillows of her bed

She felt along the wall for her white sunbonnet, for it would be visible farther than her palmetto hat She knew that Lant would return by river It would be possible for the river-bends and the height of the ledge to conceal the smoke in the swamp until it was too late. She could see

south before he passed it. The ledge dropped there to open river water and was visible for some yards. She could not be sure of seeing his boat, and as she reached the opening in the ledge above the landing, she began to wave her sun bonnet. She stood for some time, waving it back and forth, trying to distinguish one moving shadow from another She heard the boat before she saw it. Lant's voice came close at hand.

"What's the matter, Ma? Did the Prohis tear up mine, too?"

"Hit's plumb tore up and a-burnin'. I could hear 'em maulin' on the barrels They like to set the hull hammock afire."

He grounded his boat. The sides scraped against cypress knees

"It's Cleve's work," he said

"'Tain't nobody else but Cleve," she agreed "You jest mighty lucky I got here 'fore you goed on in to the creek and got ketched yourself"

"Cleve were right with 'em," he said quietly "I been to Poseys' outfit Wa'n't none of 'em there, but they ain't nothin' left but hoops and bricks Couldn't nobody but Cleve of showed 'em the way in to Poseys and to mine too."

"I heerd a car go by 'bout two hour back"

"That was them, a'right And Cleve with 'em"

Now that it had happened, he understood that he had always known that it would happen But it was strange, after all these years of caution, that the danger should have been, not from strangers, but from Cleve It was like Lantry's own dog, scavenging in his grave

"I tole you to move the outfit," Piety said She followed close behind him to keep herself on the path

"I never figgered he'd r'aly do it Go right with 'em and show 'em I knowed he were sorry, but not that sorry I never figgered he'd have the chitlin's when the time come"

They approached the house cautiously It had not been entered They stayed in quietly until the next afternoon There had been no further sound They went together to the swamp and looked at the ruins The platform over the creek had made a fine bonfire for the barrels and the cooker Nothing was left but twisted metal and blackened bricks The trees in the swamp had burned for forty feet

around, and the flames had licked far up into the hammock. Sweet gum and magnolia and hickory and palm stood sick and charred.

The woman watched him anxiously. He was trembling like a rabbit.

"Hit'll be a year 'fore the hammock's green agin," he said.

XXXIII

ABNER LANTRY and the Poseys and Luke Saunders came together across Lant's clearing at sunrise Fog veiled the scrub, as though a grey misted sea washed through the stockade of the pines The sun filtered through as they approached the cabin, so that bars of sunlight alternated with the shadowy bars that were the tree trunks

Abner said, "I mind me comin' here to live when I were a young un The scrub front o' the place were low and rollin', jest thick scrubby bush and palmettos Hit's growed now to a perfeck wall"

"Like all the rest o' the scrub," Luke said

"Like all exscusin' the Big Burn Give the rough five yare more thouten no farr, the hull scrub'll be thick-growed like that there"

"Hit's a mighty good place to be," Jim Posey said "Perticklar right now, with sons o' bitches thick as they be, our side the river"

"A man that knowed the scrub," Abner said irrelevantly, 'and somebody takened out arter him, he could jest cool out acrost it and nobody never ketch up with him"

"You reckon they ain't up yit?'

'They up 'long 'fore crack o' day"

Piety's voice came weakly from the bedroom.

'Come in, unless it's strangers."

They stepped on the breezeway and sat down Abner went into the room

'You sick in the bed, Sis?'

'I m right smart porely," she agreed "I got the fever and I cain't eat Ary mouthful gorges me My spells is comin frequent I were dead most all yistiddy evenin'"

'I m mighty sorry Where all s Lant?"

He left for Jacksonville 'bout four o'clock this mornin'."

'I knowed he were goin' I didn't know what for."

'Come clost and I ll tell you"

'Hit's jest the Poseys and Luke with me"

'You cain't tell who-all's fitten to hear things," she whispered hoarsely, "since Cleve done what he done"

He lifted the edge of the mosquito bar that enveloped the bed and sat beside her She was grey white and wasted. Her thin hair spread about her small face on the pillow, as though a child lay ill and prematurely old

"Hit's been two weeks," she told him, "since Cleve takened the Prohis to the outfit, and Lant's jest now got his last whiskey sold He figgered he'd best git him a new outfit goin' whilst he had the money to pay for it He kin git the copper sheetin' to Jacksonville for half the price Him and Zeke goed together They're fixin' to come back thu St. Augustine and stop to the rep-tyle farm and see kin they mebbe sell some 'gator hides and snake skins '

'He ain't afeerd the outfit'll git tore up agin?"

"Hit'll be tore up if the pimp finds it," she prophesied earnestly

"What time he studyin' on gittin' back?"

"He said to cook noon dinner, if I kin git outen the bed"

"We'll set here and wait on 'em You go back to sleep"

"I cain't sleep for the fleas," she complained, "and them a runnin' and a hoppin'"

'That ol' cat o' yourn sleepin' by the bed here on the deerskin, is what brings 'em in"

"That's what Lant say, but when he's gone, the cat's

my only comp'ny I figger hit's squirrel fleas We been eatin' squirrel and Lant's keerless with the hides. I been dustin' insect powder 'round my shoulders"

"Insect powder won't kill 'em Take a flea, all you kin do is git with him."

"Mebbe hit won't kill 'em, but it'll addle 'em to where they won't run nor hop"

The four men sat immobile in the breezeway Towards noon Piety left the bed and dressed tremblingly She started a fire in the kitchen range, put sweet potatoes in the oven and filled the kettle. She felt in the flour-barrel for a quart bottle of raw white whiskey and poured herself three or four tablespoonfuls, which she drank with sugar and water The bottle had raised letters that read, "Casper's Whiskey, Made By Honest North Carolina People" It had belonged to Lantry She took it to the breezeway

"If Lant was here, he'd say offer you the bottle," she said.

Abner and the Poseys drank from the tilted mouth.

Luke Saunders said, 'I wouldn't keer for it." He added in apology, "Jest a leetle seem to make me drunk. I don't hold with gittin' drunk"

Abner said, "Nor me. When a man gits drunk, I don't want nothin' to do with him But it's his business," he added

Jim said, "I'm proud you got no objections, for many's the time I couldn't tell night from day And some kind of enjoyed it."

Piety sat down with them

"The on'y time I wants it, is when I first gits on my feet Hit steadies me, like."

The talk turned to the one matter they mulled over in their minds. The old woman was the first to speak

"Well," she asked querulously, "is Cleve still sayin' he weren't the one done it?"

"He's jest now quit lyin' about it," Abner said. "I faced him down yistiddy. He heerd Lant and Zeke was goin' to Jacksonville. You know what he figgered? He figgered Lant were goin' to the Prohis' office and git to look at their books, and see were Cleve's name there. I seed Cleve to the store yistiddy. I usually take up some time with him, but lately I ain't been speakin' to him, like ever'body else. I took the notion, jest to see what he'd say. Howdy, Cleve, I says, I hear tell Lant's fixin' to go to Jacksonville." He spat across the breezeway.

"What'd he say?" Piety leaned towards him.

"*He said nary word. He jest turned as white as a log o'* cotton"

"Well, I do know"

"Hit give me the idee. Cleve, I says, you're found out. No use lyin' no longer. Kezzy told it on you and you tried to make out like she were crazy. You was low-down enough to do it and you wa'n't man enough to own up to it. Now you're found out."

"What'd he say?"

"He said, 'What I done was lawful, and what the boys was doin' was onlawful' And Py-tee, when he said it, he were tremblin' like a bonnet-patch where the bream is feedin'."

"I do know. Do ary one know if he got the money from the Prohis?"

"Don't nobody know. They jest lately changed the rule, is what folks say, and the gov'mint ain't payin' for no more spies. Did Cleve git the money 'fore they changed the rule, I cain't say. He owes most that much to the store. He charged his rations as long as he was daresome to do so He wouldn't dast show no money at the store, no-ways."

They sat in silence.

Luke Saunders said, "Sometimes Cleve look so piteful.

Then you think of what he done and you forgit to pity him"

Jim Posey asked, "Mis' Jacklin, what make Cleve like that?"

"I can't figger His ma were all right and Sylvester were all right They wa'n't nothin' quare to neither of 'em"

"Well," he said profoundly, 'hit's an awfu' way to be"

'Kezzy and the young uns is what worries me," she said

"That were a pain," Jim said 'The way she were tryin' to make out She were diggin' sweet pertaters to eat, and sellin' a few, to git somethin' to eat with 'em."

"I feels bad about cuttin' Cleve,' Jim said "I figgered shore he had a gun I feels bad about firin' him, as things has come out But hit weren't r'aly cold-out firin' I jest said to him, Cleve, you ain't doin' the work I'm payin' you to do Now you git, but ary day you take a notion to do a piece o' rale work, that day you come back He never come. He jest goed to stealin my whiskey and sellin' it at Lynne"

"If he'd told they was on starvation," Luke said, 'ary one would of holped him"

"Starvation don't exscuse him," Abner said "His belly never pinched him He ate hot dinner to my house nigh ever' day Kezzy and them young uns was the ones went hongry And Kezzy were the one jest wouldn't have it, when he goed to turn you fellers up"

Jim said, "Kezzy tells, the mornin' Cleve took the Prohis on the river, a rattlesnake struck at her three times thu the fence She knowed right then what were happenin'"

"Who's a feedin' Kezzy now?" Piety asked

'Ever' one Her and the young uns gits asked out twicet a day We all sees to that. Nary man's fool enough to buy stuff for Cleve to tote off, but Kezzy and the young uns is welcome to what they kin carry away in their own bellies."

Piety put grits on the stove to cook and scalded white bacon to fry She mixed biscuits and shaped them ready to bake Lant and Zeke came a little after noon, carrying a sheet of copper between them Abner pretended that he could not make out Lant's companion

'Who that with you, Lant? Hit's Cleve, ain't it? Why, no, hit s ol' Zeke I figgered shore you'd have your buddy Cleve along '

They slapped their thighs and laughed to hear Lant curse

Jim Posey said, 'Time you sees that pimp along with me, hit ll be his dead body '

Piety called shrilly from the kitchen door

"Now you men quit a talkin' that-a way Cleve ll be punished Nobody don't need to go a killin' of him God will reward him for what he done

Jim Posey said, "A man cain't starve to death waitin' for God to take a hand'

Abner said gravely, "That's what it comes down to Long as Cleve's about, won't nobody have no peace nor make a livin' peaceable He s done been talkin' 'bout goin' in with the Streeters to make trouble agin about the cattle. Tell what he know about the whippin', and sich as that He says he'll turn up stills fast as he kin find 'em, and ary man shootin' deer and turkey out of season, he ll turn him up too"

'How long he been talkin' wild that-a way?" Lant asked.

'Since yistiddy, when I got him to say he were the one done what were done He broke out and said all them things"

Luke said, 'If I was high sheriff, I'd have me a cellar dug under the court house for jest sich fellers I wouldn't see fit to put 'em in with men had done ordinary wrong"

Zeke offered mildly, 'Lant and me jest come from a place

[illegible]

what he done"

"He'd die," Lant said

Jim said, "Well—" and they laughed

Lant said, "That dungeon's a hell of a place I felt faintified, thinkin' of all them people had died there If I was to be shut up in there, I'd dig 'til I died"

"You'd die," Zeke assured him, 'never fear it"

"Well, I'd have the satisfaction o' diggin'"

"You know," Zeke went on, "people must of purely dreaded that place in them days You'd of thought they'd of kept out of devilment'

"Some of 'em hadn t done nothin'," Lant reminded him 'Like the Injun Osceola, where they showed he tried to git out and couldn't make it"

Zeke nodded "He grieved hisself to death"

Lant said, 'He jest couldn't make out without his freedom"

Piety called the men to dinner They washed at the basin in the kitchen window and sat down in a comfortable hunger They talked about the Indians and their dug-out canoes They had all seen the canoe raised from the St John's river

Luke said, "I'll bet a bunch o' them fellers layin' on their oars could send them things along"

They agreed that white men had treated the Indians shabbily.

"Of course," Abner said judicially, "they was savage-like, in a way o' speakin'."

They ate heartily and returned to the breezeway while Piety washed the dishes. They had not yet said the thing they came to say At last Abner shuffled his feet,

"What I want to know is, who's goin' to put Cleve where he won't interfere with nobody?"

Piety shrilled from the kitchen.

"You men quit a talkin' 'bout killin'. If it was me, now, I'd jest have his credit stopped at the store You'd bring him to time mighty quick. I'd jest say at the store, 'Hit's his trade or ours.'"

"Nobody ain't talkin' 'bout killin', Py-tee," Abner called. 'But you think up a better idee than stoppin' credit, for that's been stopped a good whiles"

"We could write him a letter,' Martin Posey suggested, "and git somebody to mail it off a ways"

"What'd the letter say?"

"Oh, tellin' him to be gone by Friday week—" he waved his hand vaguely.

"And git the gov'mint nosin' around agin," Jim grunted "The least I got to do with ary letter, the better it suit me"

"That's your house and land where they been livin', ain't it, Ab? Tell you, we'll give you two dollars for the house —jest so we kin say it's bought legal—and move the house right from offen him"

"He'd on'y set farr to hit."

"I'd like to burn his winter wood pile," Lant said, "jest to see how he like havin' things tore up and burnt."

"Tell you, Lant," Martin offered, "le's four five of us line up along the river-bank and hide in the bushes and all shoot buckshot under his boat. Jest riddle the boat, like, and if so it happened to sink, and him have to swim to the land, he might study 'fore he turned up the next feller"

"I wouldn't dast shoot at that rowboat," Abner said, "for I couldn't guarantee I wouldn't aim a leetle mite high"

They laughed lazily and stretched their legs.

"I reckon we're a sorry bunch," he said in the long easy silence. "In Clay County, Cleve'd never of got home."

Jim said apologetically, "We ain't never been bothered before, Ab We ain't used to these here pimps"

Abner rose and hitched the straps of his overalls

"We best to git goin' Shore were a fine dinner, Py tee I hopes you feels some better"

She came to the breezeway to see them off

'I hopes Cleve don't find your new outfit Lant," Abner continued "And I shore would venture to say, if he jest natchelly don't never come home agin, nobody won't never find hisself in no trouble about it Ain't I right, Jim?"

"You mighty right"

They walked through the garden at the rear

Piety said to Lant, 'Them fellers is as good as tellin' you to kill Cleve and they ll be still about it Ab had orter be ashamed"

Lant frowned

"Ab don't want Cleve messin' up with the Streeters and startin' up the cattle trouble agin," he said "I be dogged if I ll do it," he burst out "I got no idee o' killin' Cleve He better not mess up around me no more, but if he'll mind his business and leave me mind mine, I got nary call to harm him"

The garden gate clicked

"Hey, Uncle Ab," he called loudly "What you mean about Cleve not comin' home agin? Where all's he at?"

Abner raised his voice, but it was bland

'Don't nobody know, Lant Must o' skeert him to hear 'bout you goin' to Jacksonville His tracks stops 'tother side o' the river, 'bout opposite Zeke's place. Folks figgers he made for the scrub Don't nobody know is he goin' for somebody—or from somebody. He's hid out."

XXXIV

LANT cut across Thaddeus Lantry's deserted clearing He had remembered an old rain barrel at one corner of the house, whose hoops could be salvaged and used for new barrels at the outfit he was piece by piece assembling He stopped short at the over grown stoop Cleve's tracks were thick about it.

He thought, "This where you been layin' low all week, eh?'

He went cautiously into the dilapidated shack No one was there, but a pile of fish bones swarming with ants lay on the old clay hearth A pallet of fresh Spanish moss was flattened out on the floor in a corner of the room Cockroaches scrambled for shelter when he kicked it He left the clearing without getting the hoops He struck through the hammock, which thinned here to a bare fringe along the river He hesitated It might be wise to return over his own trail and then, walking backward, to efface it with a handful of brush

He thought angrily, "Leave him know I've found him."

He wished now that he knew exactly what Jim and Abner had meant He had ignored Kezzy's warning to move the still He had been sure Cleve would not go through with the business It occurred to him that perhaps Jim and Abner were warning him as Kezzy had done They might know more than they had told him Yet if they considered Cleve a graver menace, surely they would have said so He was confused and anxious At the edge of the swamp he saw a fresh chunk chipped from out a hickory

He thought, He s been lookin for timber for a axe handle I could of told him that hickory wouldn t split

He followed the swamp to the site of the burned still He had salvaged the bricks and stacked them neatly to be moved to Taylor s Dread The barrel hoops were twisted but he had beaten some back into form At the house, his copper pieces were already cut and shaped He had new barrel staves piled under clumps of palmettos and he set to work to assemble these inside the hoops

He noticed that the sun was setting earlier Soon the winter would begin with cool bright days and hearth fires in the evenings The burned swamp and hammock about him began to grow dark Ahead of him shafts of sunlight shot among the sweet gums and magnolias Squirrels moved quickly and in silence along the limbs, hurrying to their beds A chill air wavered from the brown creek water as the last of the sunlight left it It was too dark to work longer He piled staves and hoops again under the palmettos, slung his rifle across his shoulder and started up the ledge

Suddenly he knew that something was behind him He had heard no sound but a movement impalpable as a breath had stirred between him and the swamp He took a quick step forward and was conscious of a similar step behind He was chilled, as though a gust of cold wind had moved across him He had never before been followed He had stalked deer and tracked wild cat and pa[illegible]
to [illegible]
he [illegible]
sharply in the middle of his paces.

The white face that looked at him from behind a clump of sparkleberry belonged to Cleve—and it did not belong to Cleve. The light in the hammock was green and murky It picked out the sick grin and exposed gums above the

teeth that were Cleve's The resemblance ended A lifted gun-barrel glinted under the face The face was round, like an obscene moon strayed from a strange and evil universe

All his life, he knew now, he had been afraid of some thing He had drunk a fear in his mother's milk and in the buck Zeke Lantry had given him in a hollow gourd He had sucked it from the air old man Lantry had puffed out from his dying lungs A fear pulsed in his veins like poison And of what was he afraid? A soundless tracking at his back and a white pasty moon above the sparkle berries— He was blind with fear Danger was a remembered danger, remembered in his bones and in his blood He lifted the rifle and did not know he fired

He had once shot a rattlesnake in such numb terror He had put his foot across a log and had held it in mid air while he blew the snake head from the body, flexed to strike

He heard the echo of his shot die away through the hammock and across the scrub His sight cleared He moved woodenly to the clump of bushes, where a wisp of smoke still hovered The evil moon was gone and the danger was gone The twitching body was Cleve's and the face was Cleve's, with the eyelids fluttering and the mouth gaping and blood flowing smoothly over the chin He leaned his rifle against a tree and sat down with his back pressed to the trunk The last of the light faded Nothing was left of Cleve but a prone shadow near him Some one might come, but it did not matter He was purged of fear In its place was sickness He buried his face in his hands.

He thought over and over, "I never studied on killin' him"

A flock of ducks flew down the river Overhead he heard the measured sweep of their flight Then for a long time there was silence The hammock was black, yet when he

took his hands from his eyes, he thought the white of Cleve's face was visible The magnolia leaves rustled and he heard the beat of great wings The hoot-owls began to cry He lifted his head South moon was under On the other side of the earth the moon rode high, and it had power to move the owls and rabbits He closed his eyes and listened in the darkness to the rhythmic call

He wondered if it might be so with men Perhaps all men were moved against their will A man ordered his life, and then an obscurity of circumstance sent him down a road that was not of his own desire or choosing Something beyond a man's immediate choice and will reached through the earth and stirred him He did not see how any man might escape it.

Neither river nor swamp nor hammock nor impenetrable scrub could save a man from the ultimate interference. There was no safety There was no retreat Forces beyond his control, beyond his sight and hearing, took him in their vast senseless hands when they were ready The whole earth must move as the sun and moon and an obscure law directed—even the earth, planet ridden and tormented

A rabbit startled him with its sneezing He sat quickly alert He could not leave Cleve's body to be found here. No one visited the island above the landing It merged imperceptibly into creek and swamp It was a succession of boggy pools from which cypresses and palms grew thickly It was [illegible]

He dragged [illegible]
and poled up [illegible]
his way among the trees and through the muck He groped to the spot where a great cypress log had lain hollow for years He lit a match The openings were clogged with cobwebs and the fine powder of decay He crawled in backwards and edged along on his belly Inch by inch he dragged Cleve after him He backed out and wiped the

sweat and dust from his face He filled the openings with muck and humus The ants would make a fine trail through it and clean the bones He poled down the creek and walked up the ledge to the cabin

Piety was in bed She called to him

Where you been so long? I done had me a bad spell while you was gone

He did not answer She heard him take out the whiskey bottle from the flour barrel His chair scraped in front of the hearth and she could hear him blowing the embers and putting on fresh fat wood The light flickered over the rafters and lit her bed across the room high partition His shoes dropped on the pine floor A match scratched and the sweet rankness of his corn-cob pipe drifted through the rooms The chair scraped again He was pacing up and down in his bare feet Up and down, up and down, like a panther in a cage

Lant?

He did not answer

Lant!

A match scratched again He was smoking a cigarette

"You come here now! I want to see you"

He came to the side of the bed She sat upright, leaning on one hand and lifted the mosquito bar The light from the hearth fire was bright through the opened door She shaded her eyes

"I wisht I could see you, she said

His face was a red-brown blur She could not see the torment But a panic and a distress came to her from him as tangibly as though she touched it

"You tell me!" she wailed "What is it? You tell me!"

"You lay down and be still," he said "You won't git you no sleep rarin' so"

He went out and closed the door behind him He sat by the fire until midnight The woman lay on her back

until the pillow was damp with tears She made no sound She moved the pillow to one side to dry The rest of the night she heard him tossing in his bed Towards morning a rain fell. It was a rain heavy enough to wash out tracks

XXXV

PIETY fought for breath She dug her old horny toes into the foot of her bed and struggled like a bass on a set-line Lant had gone for Kezzy He had not seen her since she clicked the garden gate behind her and walked away across the clearing with swollen eyes He had avoided her. He crossed the river by boat and found her watering ruta-bagas in her garden

He said, "Ma's 'bout done for," and she answered, 'I'll come with you"

They returned together in silence The two children chattered like birds Kezzy shook her head when the older one asked her questions She dropped them both in the Lantry yard to play and went into the house ahead of Lant He noticed that she was thin and the black eyes seemed deep-sunken She went to the bed

'How yuh, Aunt Py tee? It's Kezzy speakin'."

'I m sick, Kezzy, and dyin'"

Kezzy drew a chair to the side of the bed and reached in to take the old knotted hands

"Tell me 'bout it Your spells comin' frequent?"

'Mighty frequent and mighty bad. The doctor were here 'fore Lant goed for you I heered 'em talkin'. I cain't see, but I kin hear."

"What's it like when you're takened?"

"Things gits grey and distant, Kezzy. I go off into the twilight Into some lonesome-lookin' place."

The winter afternoon darkened early

Kezzy said, "I'll go to the kitchen and cook a leetle hot supper. Kin you eat a mite o' somethin' tasty?"

"I couldn't"

'You want your snuff?"

'Nary thing"

Kezzy cooked supper She and Lant and the children ate hungrily She put the children on the couch near the hearth fire in the front room and covered them with a quilt Lant followed her into Piety's bedroom The old woman was losing consciousness She roused as they came in

That you, Kezzy? Kezzy! Where's Cleve?"

The woman caught her breath

'He's gone, Aunt Py-tee"

'He been gone long?'

'Since 'way before last new moon"

"Kezzy?'

'Here I be."

'Folks think ary thing?"

'Folks thinks nary thing, Aunt Py-tee," she said quietly "Nobody jest don't look for him back"

Piety sighed

'Lant," she complained, "outen that light"

'They ain't no light lit"

"'Tis, too Hit scalds my eye-balls"

She relaxed and breathed steadily through the night. Lant and Kezzy sat unmoving on stiff chairs. A screech owl quavered and Kezzy found an old hat and turned it inside out.

'To stop that quiverin' fuss," she said

At daylight the cat stirred from his nest on the foot of the bed He walked across it and sniffed at the lean face with its closed eyes He bristled and jumped from the bed and scrambled out of the room.

Kezzy said, 'Oh, my God"

She covered Piety's face with the counterpane. Lant moved his chair to the window at the far side of the bed

and sat with his back to the room, looking out into the scrub. A streak of saffron spread across the east. Kezzy walked around the bed and stood beside him. She put one hand on his forehead and began smoothing back his shaggy forelock. The window framed the grey slat fence, with coral honeysuckle blooming across it. The sun swung up above the scrub and the dew glistened across the red-top.

Kezzy said, "You never been lonesome, young feller. Scaperin' around in the scrub, a-huntin' and a-trappin'. You like to be mighty lonesome now."

He did not answer.

"Don't you reckon you better leave me and the young uns take up with you?"

She drew his head to her.

"You and me git married, and me to he'p you at the outfit?"

He turned and buried his face against her breast.

"I've always thought a heap o' you, Lant."

His voice was muffled.

"My God, Kezzy, how kin I?"

"What you mean?"

"I shot Cleve."

The gentle stroking was suspended a moment and then continued.

"You think I didn't know?"

The steady heart-pulse under his ear did not change its beat.

"I been grievin' for all two of you—you and Cleve. But most pertickler for you. I reckon you had it to do."

"I don't know. I cain't be shore, did he mean me harm."

"Well, it's done."

She left him and pressed her face against the cool moist window.

"Man, the scrub's a fine place to be,' she said. 'If things ever gits too thick, you and me jest grab us each a young un and a handful o' shells and the guns and light out acrost it I'd dare ary man to mess up with me, yonder in the scrub'

The growing sunlight wakened the children on the couch The man and woman went into the front room and closed the bedroom door after them

Kezzy said, "Your Aunt Pyteе s dead You young uns be nice and quiet"

She cooked breakfast and they left for the river

Lant said, "I don t reckon it s right to leave the house, but I belong to go down the river to the Dread and look at my mash"

I ll hurry," Kezzy said 'I ll git somebody to come lay her out and I ll see the preacher for the buryin' and be back by noon '

At the edge of the creek she stopped short

"Lant," she burst out, 'where-all s he at?'

The hair rose on his neck Kezzy would go where he went She had hunted the swamp islands with him She would visit them again Long storms might rot the hollow log where Cleve lay 'Possums were scavengers They might drag out the bones, one by one He could not have Kezzy stumble up on anything that had been Cleve He decided at once to come at night and drag the log with its contents to the river

He said, "Kezzy, don't ask me sich as that I ll give my promise you won't never see him."

She nodded, white of face.

"That's good enough"

Sweat stood out around his eyes The log might not sink before it was seen It might lodge up against a lower bank and fall to pieces and Cleve's bones lie suddenly white

under over hanging elder He wondered if the rifle bullet through the chest had left its record on a bone He would have to risk it

He thought desperately, 'The law's like to come up with me yet'

Kezzy held the children in front of her in the rowboat He poled through the creek to the river The woman pointed out a motionless grey form on a limb above them She tilted the children's heads to show it

"Lookit the ol' mammy cat squirrel settin' so still She's likely got leetle ol' squirrel young uns a waitin' in the nest."